

Graphic Narrative Theory: Comics Storytelling in *Watchmen*

Honors Research Thesis

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by

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Introduction:

Toward a Graphic Narrative Theory

Watchmen, along with Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* and Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, ushered in the age of the graphic novel, having helped change the face of the comics industry. Many were unsure of how to define a "graphic novel" while others defiantly dismissed the new form, recognized a lucrative new market for popular fiction, or noted that beyond the flurry of news coverage, some of these works were worthy of academic study as an innovative practice within the larger domain of comics storytelling. The three aforementioned works generated national and international interest in the graphic novel. Though the graphic novel might be described in general terms as a lengthy comic book, it soon became evident that there wasn't a one-size-fits-all definition of this literary form. Graphic novels were repackaged and printed on higher quality paper and whereas traditional comic books were held together with staples, a graphic novel was square-bound and glued into a binding. A significant difference between (some) comics and graphic novels was that the latter often dealt with quite weighty issues, such as the Holocaust, vigilantism, and the Cold War.

When Will Eisner proposed his book *A Contract With God* (1978)¹ to his publisher, he recalls that "a little voice inside me said, 'Hey stupid, don't tell him it's a comic or he'll hang up on you.' So I said, 'It's a graphic novel.'" Eisner's "spontaneous sleight-of hand marketing" in labeling *Contract* as a graphic novel suggests that he was aware of the possible negative implications that the label of "comics" carried (Arnold). Eisner's new classification was a marketing strategy aimed at distancing the comic book from its lengthier and more mature

counterpart. This designation fed into the media-hyped movement led by the other graphic novels mentioned previously.

Originally, *Watchmen* was released as twelve issues of a comic-book series between September 1986 and October 1987. The work featured a self-contained narrative as well as original characters², and a setting removed from the DC Comics universe. Gibbons himself asserts that “Lofty though the term [“graphic novel”] might have seemed, *Watchmen*’s narrative certainly had the weight and complexity of a prose novel, and it was, after all, indisputably graphic in its presentation. In addition, it was a complete story, needing no prior knowledge and requiring no further reading to be a satisfying fictional experience” (Gibbons, Kidd, and Essl 237)³.

Set in 1985, *Watchmen* is an alternate history in which the United States is inching closer to a nuclear war with the Soviet Union. Alternate history is a genre of fiction in which the story depicts a history that diverges from the actual history of the world (see my second chapter for a detailed discussion of alternate history). Usually there is a significant event, known as a point-of-divergence by alternate history fans, that sets the plot of the story into motion. In the case of *Watchmen*, the point-of-divergence is the triumph of the United States in the Vietnam War. In this counterfactual narrative world, Richard Nixon is serving his fifth term as president and costumed adventurers are not only real, but roam the streets of New York—at least until the Keene Act is passed in 1977, and forces the majority of caped crusaders into retirement. Several others, such as Edward Blake (aka the Comedian) and Jon Osterman (aka Dr. Manhattan) become government employees while still others willingly reveal their identities and benefit from their time as costumed heroes. Hollis Mason, the first Nite Owl, writes and publishes a

book, *Under the Hood*, detailing his experience as a caped crusader, while Adrian Veidt (aka Ozymandias) creates a successful commercial empire upon his retirement in 1975.

Watchmen thus tells the story of a group of past and present superheroes. Its opening panels detail the death of the Comedian, the inciting event that sets the rest of the plot into motion. The unfolding narrative explores the Comedian's mysterious murder while also providing details about the lives of the past and present superheroes depicted as real people who must face ethical and personal issues, struggle with shortcomings and neuroses, and generally lack recognizable super powers⁴. The investigation of Blake's death yields nothing conclusive. Because he was formerly affiliated with the United States government, the investigators toy with the idea of foul play on the part of Russian Communists; but given America's current superiority in the arms race, this explanation seems unlikely. Afraid of attracting the attention of the last costumed adventurer, the vigilante Rorschach, the detectives seek to keep the murder quiet.

However, Rorschach does investigate and discovers that Blake was indeed a costumed hero. He then deduces that Blake's murder is part of a master plan to eliminate "masks," as Rorschach calls the superheroes, and proceeds to warn the remaining new generation of Watchmen: Dr. Manhattan, the linchpin of American nuclear superiority; Laurie Juspecky, the second Silk Spectre, the daughter of Sally Jupiter (the first Silk Spectre), and Dr. Manhattan's lover (at least when the narrative opens); Daniel Dreiberg, the second Nite Owl and Rorschach's former partner; and Adrian Veidt, reputedly the smartest man in the world.

Within the fictional universe of *Watchmen*, the United States and the Soviet Union have been moving closer to nuclear war since 1959. Dr. Manhattan's "creation" disrupts the mutually assured destruction doctrine because he holds the power to neutralize most of the Russian nuclear weapons in mid-air. With Dr. Manhattan serving as its trump card, the United States has

enjoyed distinct strategic advantages; however, its “trump card” has also accelerated the nuclear arms race, thus increasing global tensions. Because of its anticipation of global war, American society assumes a general sense of fatalism about the future. Manifestations of this stress include graffiti inspired by the Hiroshima bombing, the designation of many buildings in the city as fallout shelters, and the creation of “Meltdown” candies.

Rorschach continues his investigation into the Comedian's death, even though the other former heroes discredit his theory. Over the course of the narrative he is framed, captured by the police, incarcerated in Sing Sing, and subjected to psychiatric examination by a Dr. Malcolm Long. Meanwhile, Laurie and Dr. Manhattan end their relationship when she becomes fed up with his inability to relate to humans. After Laurie moves in with Dan, Dr. Manhattan appears on a televised interview in which he's accused of having “infected” former coworkers and ex-girlfriend (and former masked adventurer), Janey Slater, with terminal cancer. Dr. Manhattan, feeling that he poses a threat to others, then exiles himself to Mars. Around this time, someone makes an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate Veidt.

Dan eventually starts to credit Rorschach's theory (with Rorschach himself having been unmasked as Walter Kovacs) about a costumed-hero killer; Dan then convinces Laurie to help him break Rorschach out of Sing Sing. Once news begins to circulate that the formerly retired adventurers have gone rogue, a violent and drug-addled gang, the Top Knots, mistakenly kill the still-retired first Nite Owl, Hollis Mason, because they believe that he's the once-again-active second Nite Owl, Dan. Meanwhile, the reunited Rorschach and (second) Nite Owl scourge the New York underworld, seeking clues about who commissioned the hit on Veidt. Their subsequent discoveries set the climax and conclusion of the narrative into motion.

These events of the narrative are supplemented by commentary from a cadre of secondary characters. These characters include Bernie, the teenage reader of *Tales of the Black Freighter* (a comic-within-a-comic), the newsstand vendor who stocks those comics, Rorschach's prison psychiatrist, Malcolm Long, and the police officers investigating Rorschach's death. At the end of each chapter, the authors include a "document" that augments the story. An excerpt from Hollis Mason's memoir details the creation of the original superhero league, the Minutemen; another episode concludes with documents pertaining to Kovacs' criminal history; and a third episode presents the introduction from Professor Milton Glass' analysis of Dr. Manhattan's superpowers.

Comics fans as well as critics apparently realized the quality and depth of Gibbons, Higgins, and Moore's graphic novel. Even before it was packaged as such, it won three prestigious Kirby Awards in 1987 for Best New Series, Best Writer, and Best Writer/Artist. After it was published in graphic-novel form, *Watchmen* won every Will Eisner Comic Industry Award for which it was nominated in 1988, which included the categories of Best Finite Series, Best Graphic Album, Best Writer, and Best Writer/Artist (Hahn). Outside of the comic book industry, an important moment in the text's history came in 1988 when it won the Hugo Award in the category of Other Forms. The Hugo Awards, which are presented by the World Science Fiction Society (WSFS), are the science fiction industry's most prominent awards. To date, *Watchmen* is the only graphic novel ever to have won the award. In subsequent years, *Watchmen* raked in still other accolades; for example, it was featured in articles in *The San Diego Union-Tribune* and it was included in *The Comics Journal*'s 1999 list of their choices for "The Top 100 Comics of the Century." Then in October 2005, *Time* magazine's Lev Grossman and Richard Vacayo included the text on their list of what they thought to be "The Best 100 English-

Language Novels Since 1923” (the year that *Time* magazine began). Additionally, the text made Andrew D. Arnold’s list for *Time* magazine’s “Top Ten Graphic Novels in English Since 1923” (“Nominations”).

Given *Watchmen*’s privileged position in the emerging canon of graphic novels, it makes sense that the text should be studied from the vantage points afforded by contemporary literary theory. To this end, and following up on Jared Gardner’s and David Herman’s suggestion that comics researchers “should explore the emerging connection between comics studies and narrative theory” (3), my thesis brings *Watchmen* into dialogue with ideas developed by scholars of narrative. Overall I seek to address two important questions: how the ideas from narrative theory can be brought to bear on graphic narratives, thus allowing for a richer understanding of texts such as *Watchmen*, and in turn how the complexity of multimodal narratives—i.e., stories conveyed through multiple semiotic channels, including graphic narratives told in words and images—might pose challenges to existing models of story. With comics emerging as one of the world’s most compelling forms of narrative practice, in this project I seek to lay further groundwork for what Gardner and Herman refer to as *graphic narrative theory*—itself an emergent area of study that has opened up “as comics scholars and narrative theorists work to open new avenues for exchange” (4). *Watchmen*’s layered temporal structures, sophisticated deployment of methods of focalization and characterization, and complex use of speech and thought representation make it an ideal candidate for exploratory work in the domain of graphic narrative theory.

Focusing in chapter 1 on Catherine Emmott’s contextual frame theory, which centers on issues of narrative comprehension, and in chapter 2 on Marie-Laure Ryan’s analysis of fiction via the theory of possible worlds, I suggest how putting *Watchmen* into dialogue with these

frameworks for narrative inquiry illuminates not only Moore, Gibbons, and Higgins' text but also the frameworks themselves. On the one hand, the frameworks shed light on the structures and dynamics of comics storytelling—in particular, how graphic narratives require readers to build and update models of the storyworlds that those narratives convey, even as those worlds take their place within a broader array of possible worlds created via fictional texts, counterfactual propositions, thought experiments, and other worldmaking activities. On the other hand, the frameworks I explore were developed on the basis of print texts; hence I use *Watchmen* to investigate how the comics medium might necessitate more or less extensive adjustments to ideas originally geared to stories told in the medium of print, thereby contributing to the broader field of transmedial narratology.

Indeed, a number of questions arise from stories that exploit more than one semiotic channel to evoke a narrative world (Herman, “Word-Image/Utterance-Gesture”). Are worlds constructed differently in multichannel texts than in single-channel texts? How might prior accounts of narrative features (such as speech and thought representation, focalization, and issues of time and duration) developed on the basis of single-channel texts need to be recalibrated to encompass graphic storytelling? Do comics and graphic narratives “afford different storytelling possibilities than other kinds of multimodal narratives that exploit different semiotic channels,” such as words and gestures in face-to-face storytelling, or moving images and sounds in cinematic narratives (Gardner and Herman 5-6)? My project addresses some of these questions and in the process seeks to outline future directions for graphic narrative theory.

Contextual Frames in *Watchmen*

In the opening panels of *Watchmen*, shown in figure 1, police have arrived at Edward Blake's apartment, which is also the scene of his murder. Panels 3, 5, and 7 stand out from the others on this first page of the text. What makes them different? In this chapter I draw on aspects of Catherine Emmott's contextual frame theory to explore this question, while also considering the extent to which issues of medium-specificity—the specific constraints and affordances provided by the comics medium—might pose a challenge to Emmott's model.

It is not just that these panels are tinted red; what is more, in them two new characters, Edward Blake and his murderer, have been *bound* into what Emmott identifies as a *contextual frame*¹. A contextual frame is a mental representation in which contextual information—which may include details regarding which characters are present in the physical environment, where the action is located, and the approximate time of the action – is stored. These frames provide episodic information about a configuration of characters, location, and time (Emmott 103-4). The basic idea behind Emmott's theory of contextual frames is that the reader uses textual cues in stories to *bind* and *prime* characters into and/or out of mentally-constructed frames—with those frames being models for what's going on at a given point in the narrative. For Emmott, *binding* refers to the process by which "... 'episodic' links between entities [within frames] are established, thereby creating a context which is monitored by the mind." *Priming* is the process "by which one particular contextual frame becomes the main focus of attention for the reader" (Emmott 123). Further, a reader's "subsequent interpretations of character-indexing pronouns" hinge on such frames, which allow the reader to pick out what referents correspond to a pronoun

such as *it*, *him*, or *she* (Herman, *Basic Elements* 126). Yet unlike the "single-track" print narratives Emmott based her model on, graphic narratives are multimodal, drawing on both verbal and visual tracks. A key question is whether Emmott's theory can account for contextual frames in complex graphic narratives like *Watchmen*, or whether it needs to be adjusted in more or less significant ways to accommodate storytelling practices in this medium. For example, while readers can sometimes look to visual indicators to help determine temporal structures when there is not an obvious verbal signifier (or when there is an ambiguous signifier), the visual track can also complicate the process of determining where to place a given situation or event on the time-line of the narrative.

With these basic concepts in mind, we can return to the panel sequence in figure 1. In the first panel in this sequence, the reader can see two detectives and a police officer investigating Blake's murder. In the next panel, the detectives continue to hypothesize about the events that took place in the apartment. Emmott holds that a contextual frame is primed if it is the main focus of attention for the reader, so in the case of graphic narratives the primed contextual frame would be the narrative that is presented in the current panel. Hence the first two panels on this page are primed. The third panel is tinged red, possibly indicating a different narrative level than that presented in panels 1-2. Additionally, two new characters—what Emmott would call *enactors*, or past (or dreamed or imagined) versions of the characters who appear at the main narrative level—have been bound into this frame: Edward Blake and his murderer. The idea of enactors clarifies how stories can anchor the same characters in different time frames, requiring that readers adjust their interpretation of the action accordingly.

Thus panel 3 cannot chronologically follow panel 2 because in panel 2 Blake has already been murdered and therefore (according to the rules of the *Watchmen* storyworld) cannot be alive

and the victim of murder again in the present. This inference, coupled with the red tinge of panels 3, 5, and 7, suggests that the authors are distinguishing between two diegetic or narrative levels. It isn't easy to ascertain what is happening in the red-tinged panels because they could be analepses, also known as flashbacks, or they could be belief frames, opening up access to a "subworld" created by a character's thoughts or beliefs. After scrutinizing panels 3, 5, and 7, the reader may be able to rule out the belief-frame theory because the visual images do not correlate with the detectives' ideas about the crime, inasmuch as these ideas are expressed in the text boxes at the top of each panel. The red-tinged frames could potentially depict analepses and because these scenes are presented in panels 3, 5, and 7, they are also primed. But can we conclude that, because the detectives' thoughts are superimposed in boxes above these panels, the scene presented in panels 1-2 is also primed? Here is where questions about medium-specificity must be taken into account when considering the possibilities and limitations of Emmott's model vis-à-vis graphic storytelling.

In single-channel or mono-modal print narratives, only one sentence can occupy a specific place at any given time. One cannot read two sentences at a time, and thus engage with two primed contextual frames simultaneously². By contrast, because of their multimodal nature, graphic narratives are able to present two contextual frames that may simultaneously be primed, as is evident in figure 1. The possibility of a multimodal narrative having two primed frames raises a variety of questions. What's the function or effect of having more than one primed contextual frame? What is the relationship between the primed panels? Is one primed panel "more primed" than the other? And if so, what does this even mean? Is one panel sequence framing the other? In the opening sequence of *Watchmen*, as I go on to discuss, the purpose of the red-tinged frames is arguably to indicate to the reader that the narrative will be concerned

with enactors situated at different narrative levels. My more general point, however, is that graphic narratives allow for more than one primed panel sequence—in ways that Emmott’s model can illuminate, even as the comics narrative medium suggests the need to clarify and refine some of the basic assumptions underlying her account.

In the same vein, in a way that is closely linked with the ideas of bound and primed characters and contextual frames, Emmott draws a distinction between *covert* and *overt* enactors. A character in a traditional textual narrative “is overt if, in the sentence, there is mention of the primed character by: 1.) name; 2.) common noun; 3.) or pronoun; or 4.) if there is a grammatical elision or other indication at the textual level of a character’s presence” (Emmott 125). Further, a character that is not in the primed frame is neither covert nor overt. Yet in graphic narratives, some narrative details may be present in the visual track but not in the verbal track and vice versa; this aspect of graphic narratives challenges Emmott’s definition of covert and overt characters. Because Blake’s body isn’t visible in panel 2 of figure 1 and because he isn’t mentioned in the conversation between the detectives, the reader may conclude that his enactor is covert in this panel. However, on page 3 in episode 1, Blake’s enactor is lying on the floor with a bloody nose. The dialogue box proclaims, “Well, listen, between you and me, I think we can rule **him** out as a suspect. A job like this just isn’t his style” (Gibbons, Higgins, and Moore episode 1, page 3). The use of the pronoun “him” could refer to Blake, but from page 2 of the same episode, the reader knows that the detectives are talking about Vice-President Ford, who is therefore the referent of “him.” Though the detectives do not refer to Blake in their conversation, his enactor appears in the visual track and according to Emmott’s definition of covert and overt characters, Blake would be covert. However, because he is depicted visually, one could argue that he is, in fact, overt. If his character is overt, this also implies that the panel in which he appears is primed.

This example again indicates that Emmott's model may need to be recalibrated in order to accommodate the multimodal nature of graphic novels.

As this preliminary analysis of the opening of *Watchmen* suggests, Emmott's contextual frame theory sheds light on how readers are able to grasp the relationship between narrative levels in these panels by binding entities (characters as well as other items in the storyworld) into contextual frames and by recognizing that across contiguous panels, different versions of one and the same character—i.e., different enactors—may be involved. Adapting Emmott's ideas for the study of comics, this chapter goes on to explore in more detail how the creators of *Watchmen* use words and images to establish contextual frames, bind entities into those frames, situate enactors on multiple diegetic levels, and employ a variety of frame mechanisms to layer the complexity of the narrative. At the same time, I consider the extent to which her model might need to be adjusted when brought to bear on graphic narratives. Indeed, the present chapter suggests that *Watchmen* contains panels whose verbal-visual complexity challenges Emmott's original account. Along the same lines, Teresa Bridgeman has explored how Emmott's ideas might need to be adapted when used in connection with graphic narratives. Working with *bande dessinée*, the French-language tradition of comics, Bridgeman lays groundwork for my own study. However, the graphic narratives that Bridgeman examines do not exhibit the same complexity as *Watchmen*, whose scope and sophistication provide an even more compelling challenge for Emmott's original model. In the present chapter, I explore the extent to which specific features of *Watchmen*—namely, focalization, level shifts, and temporality—can be accommodated within Emmott's model. My hypothesis is that features of this sort suggest the need for further research on contextual frames across storytelling media, including graphic narratives.

Reexamining Enactors: Character Versions in *Watchmen*

Emmott's concept of enactors, as suggested previously, is designed to explain how readers distinguish among different versions (or stages of development) of particular characters. In traditional print narratives, readers use a variety of techniques to distinguish between storyworld agents and their various enactors. For example, a reader can note physical descriptions of characters and use this information for identification purposes, rely on a distinctive pattern of speech or a certain lexicon used by a character, or else recall established contextual frames and by that means determine which enactors are present in which frames. The reader is able to perform all of these operations while reading a graphic novel, where she has the added advantage of being able to see the characters in the panels. However, there are medium-specific features of graphic novels—along with features specific to the superhero genre³—that complicate the reader's ability to make sense of enactors in comics and graphic novels.

In a multimodal medium like comics, a character depicted in the visual track may not necessarily be relevant to the narrative. Because the verbal track doesn't have to detail every person in a room or crowd, superfluous characters may—and often do—appear in the visual track of the narrative. For this reason, the reader has to determine which enactors are an integral part of the plot. Another interpretive challenge arises from the sheer number of enactors present in a graphic narrative such as *Watchmen*. While many level shifts are indicated in either the verbal or visual track or both, there are several instances where this is not the case. In these instances, the reader must be able to determine which version of Dan, for example, is appearing in the current panel—is it one of Dan's enactors in an analepsis or is it Dan at the primary diegetic level? This distinction is especially difficult because the action at the primary narrative

level takes place over the course of several days; for this reason, the characters' appearances change very little. The process of sorting out the enactors is further complicated by a notable feature of the superhero genre, which is that superheroes tend to appear in costume. The costume may undergo adjustments over the course of the narrative, as is the case in Sam Raimi's 2002 *Spider-Man* film, but in general superhero costumes tend to remain static throughout a particular narrative. Hence readers have to take special care in placing Dan's costume-clad enactors in time. Because Dan's Nite Owl costume doesn't change, the reader can't rely on his appearance while he is in costume to indicate a singular point in time.

Building on these preliminary remarks, the following subsections explore, in greater detail, how *Watchmen* raises questions about enactor identification.

The Relevance of Enactors in *Watchmen*

In her account of enactors, Emmott suggests that by keeping track of updated character versions across different contextual frames, readers can likewise keep track of when a particular event takes place in time. For example, readers can differentiate between a character at the main diegetic level and her enactor that appears in a prolepsis, or flash-forward. Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* affords an example in the medium of print. In the opening scenes, Esther Greenwood details her first days in New York City as an intern for a fashion magazine. In the middle of a paragraph in which she describes the free gifts she received from the magazine, the narrator makes the interjection that "For a long time afterward I hid them [the free gifts] away, but later, when I was all right again, I brought them out, and I still have them around the house. I use the lipsticks now and then, and last week I cut the plastic starfish off the sunglasses case for the baby

to play with” (Plath 3). Several indicators, such as the words “later, when I was all right” and the mention of a baby that appears to be Greenwood’s, suggest that the narrator is focusing on a future occurrence. The reader is therefore able to differentiate between the enactor who is narrating the text and the enactor who later cuts the starfish off the sunglasses case for her baby. In graphic novels, meanwhile, both cue words and images can be used to signal level shifts—and therefore new enactors—in ways that parallel the Plath example. But how does this process play out in *Watchmen* specifically?

In some sequences, Emmott’s account of enactors suggests how readers are able to make sense of the complex spatiotemporal structures in the narrative. In panels 1-2 in figure 1, for instance, the reader understands via the text boxes and the conversation between the detectives that Blake is dead. When his character appears alive in the third panel in figure 1, the reader knows that this is one of Blake’s enactors and that consequently, the panels in which the living Blake appears must exist at a diegetic level separate from the one in which the detectives are investigating his murder. Here the idea of enactors suggests how readers are able to untangle the interwoven levels of the storyworld.

Because *Watchmen* is such a complex and intricate narrative, however, there are other sequences in which it is more difficult to determine the status or spatiotemporal location of an enactor. One such example appears in figure 2. At this point in the narrative, the reader knows that Rorschach—recently unmasked as Walter Kovacs—is locked up in Sing Sing; that Laurie has left Dr. Manhattan and has since moved in with Dan; and that someone appears to be attempting to kill off the Watchmen. While refilling his sugar canister in panel 1, Dan is startled by a noise in the basement and cries out, “**Laurie?** Did you **shout?** Everything **okay** down there?” In panel 2, Rorschach responds, “Maybe. Or maybe someone’s picking off costumed

heroes.” It appears that Rorschach managed to escape from Sing Sing, found one of his extra masks, and discovered a way into Dan’s house. While this way of interpreting the sequence might seem implausible at first glance, the reader is aware of Rorschach’s particular knack for eluding the authorities and also of his propensity for illegal activities. Furthermore, the reader understands that the narrative, as a superhero comic (or at least a postmodern rewrite⁴ of a superhero comic), adheres to a set of norms and conventions that are different from those of “real life.” Finally, there is little evidence in this panel sequence that suggests a shift from the main diegetic level. It isn’t until the last page of the episode that the reader can unequivocally determine that Rorschach is still imprisoned in Sing Sing when Dan tells Laurie that they “should spring Rorschach” (episode 7, page 28). With this realization comes the secondary realization that panels 2, 4, and 6 are actually analeptic references. In this example, the reader faces considerable difficulties in identifying which of Rorschach’s enactors is being featured in the panels in question and hence in differentiating among diegetic levels—in this case, between the main diegetic level and the analeptic subworlds that correspond to Dan’s memory of prior encounters with Rorschach. In discovering on page 28 of episode 7 that Rorschach is still incarcerated, the reader must reconfigure her contextual frames. This process, which Emmott terms a *frame repair*, will be explored in detail in the next section.

These examples suggest how, because of its reliance on two different semiotic tracks, the comics medium presents challenges to identifying and differentiating among enactors (and hence, contextual frames) that are different from the challenges presented by print texts⁵. In some cases, the verbal channel can cue readers to draw inferences that are at odds with those cued by the verbal channel. My next subsection discusses how *Watchmen*’s participation in (or reflexive exploration of) the genre of superhero comics creates additional challenges for Emmott’s model.

Specifically, the characters' costumes can trigger mistaken inferences about which enactor is present in a given panel—in a way that leads directly to Emmott's idea of frame repairs, which I discuss in the final section of this chapter.

Enactors, Superhero Costumes, and the Limits of Contextual Frame Theory

As discussed in my previous subsection, *Watchmen* features a number of panel sequences in which it is difficult to identify which enactor or character version is involved in the action. On page 3 of episode 7, the panels alternate between Dan growing increasingly alarmed about Laurie's safety and a conversation he has with Rorschach at a point in time that is difficult to determine. As a result, panels 2, 4, and 6 in figure 2 are tricky to position both in terms of the plot and on the larger narrative timeline. The reader learned in episode 6 that Rorschach/Walter Kovacs has been imprisoned in Sing Sing. There are no time or date signifiers thus far in episode 7, so the reader is unsure of where this portion of the story falls in the larger temporal structure of the narrative. The borders around the panels remain the same throughout the graphic novel, so the reader cannot rely on this feature to signal a change in narrative levels⁶. For this reason, when she encounters panel 2 in the text (see figure 2), the reader may entertain two hypotheses about the temporal position of the events being portrayed: either this episode is occurring before Rorschach's imprisonment (and therefore, these panels are part of an analeptic sequence) or somehow Rorschach has escaped from Sing Sing and has broken into Dan's house again.

The reader can establish support for both theories. On the one hand, the panels could be situated on a single diegetic level. Rorschach has repeatedly demonstrated breaking-and-entering finesse and, given his history, it isn't entirely implausible to imagine that he managed to escape

from Sing Sing. After determining that the mysterious hand holding the smiley-face pin in the second panel in figure 2 is Dan's, the reader will recall that Dan is still in possession of the Comedian's pin. Further supporting the hypothesis that these panels occupy a single diegetic level is the way Dan's comments and behavior seem to be responses to Rorschach's speech. In panel 2, Rorschach suggests that "maybe someone's picking off costumed heroes" – to which Dan cries, "Oh, God. **Laurie?** Laurie, hang on, I'm coming!" (Gibbons, Higgins, and Moore episode 7, page 3).

On the other hand, several other features of the text support the conclusion that two separate diegetic levels can be found in this sequence. Even though Rorschach is an experienced criminal, Sing Sing is a high-security prison and it's unlikely that he could have escaped (but then again, this is a superhero comic, so expectations and realities are different in this realm; see my next chapter). In panel 4 of figure 2, Rorschach is holding a bottle of *Nostalgia* aftershave. His repugnant scent has been referenced several times throughout the narrative so the aftershave probably isn't his and, additionally, it isn't something that Dan would keep in the kitchen. Once the reader makes this deduction, she will assume that panels 2, 4, and 6 (see figure 2) are analeptic shifts to remembered frames or else belief frames of some kind. These small incongruities are enough to suggest that there are multiple diegetic levels present in these panels. The reader may suspect that these panels are flashbacks, but they are difficult to identify because the scenes are presented from a different point of view in episode 7 than they are in episodes 1 and 3, where they originally appear (panel 2 initially appears on page 12 of episode 1 and panels 4 and 6 on page 24 of episode 3). Coupled with this challenge, the enactors' appearances change very little, if at all. The constancy of their appearance could be a result of the relatively limited time-period covered by the main diegetic level, a time-span during which one's appearance

probably wouldn't change noticeably. What is more, with few exceptions, the characters do not change clothes. Rorschach wears a "costume" that is different than Kovacs' and Dan is most often depicted in a dress shirt, tie, and vest.

In this respect, *Watchmen* alludes to—and engages reflexively with—a well-known generic marker of superhero stories. Superheroes don't wear a different costume depending on their mood; their costumes remain static for the most part. Throughout the course of a superhero's career, he or she will occasionally update his or her costume, but otherwise the character will continue to appear in that specific ensemble for a significant amount of time. Because of the static nature of a superhero costume, a reader can't rely on the image of a costume-clad enactor to help her distinguish between diegetic levels. Thus, when brought to bear on multimodal narratives like *Watchmen*, Emmott's account of enactors needs to be adjusted to accommodate ambiguous visual cues of this sort. A key question is how readers of comics draw on information from both the visual and verbal channels—and also from the arrangement of panels into larger sequences—in order to formulate and update inferences about which enactor is involved in a given stretch of the text, and hence which contextual frame is pertinent for understanding the story.

My next section focuses on Emmott's account of the way narratives cue readers to shift to different contextual frames in order to make sense of how a given textual detail relates to preceding and following details. Once again, my chief concern is with how aspects of the comics medium might require a recalibration of Emmott's model, which is based on traditional print narratives.

Frame Mechanisms in *Watchmen*: Recalls, Repairs, and Switches

An important facet of contextual frame theory is its focus on what I have termed *frame mechanisms*, which include Emmott's ideas of frame recalls, repairs, and switches⁷. In comics, these mechanisms shed light on the way readers make sense of transitions between panels. Scott McCloud, in his groundbreaking work, *Understanding Comics*, suggests that there are six types of panel-to-panel relationships. These relationships are concerned with the content of the panels and the ways that they are connected to one another; for instance, scene-to-scene transitions are those depicting relatively large-scale shifts in space or time over the course of several panels and a non sequitur is a type of transition in which there is no logical relationship between panels (McCloud 70-74). Conversely, the account I'm developing in dialogue with Emmott's work is concerned with panel-to-panel relationships in terms of the temporal structure of the narrative as a whole. *Watchmen* uses a variety of complex temporal structures, including analepses, prolepses, montage panels⁸, and what Emmott terms *belief frames*, which come into play when characters in the storyworld entertain hypothetical or counterfactual events. Emmott's discussion of belief frames is particularly relevant for analyzing a number of panel sequences in *Watchmen*. She asserts that the reader should think of belief frames in terms of perspective, point of view, and interpretive framing of events (Emmott 165). In turn, the concept of belief frames can throw light on the interwoven timelines and worlds in the opening panels of the narrative.

These mechanisms can be illustrated via specific panel sequences from the text. To return to the opening panels of the narrative, which is presented in figure 1, the reader will notice that while the scene presents a version of the way events could have unfolded in the moments before Blake's death, there is no dialogue from that moment, which would be indicated with speech balloons or thought bubbles. Instead, the policeman's theory is superimposed on the images

depicting Blake's death. The implication here is that the scene in panel 3 is what the officer imagines to have occurred in the apartment because his perspective is the only one that has been established in that panel. Put another way, in the opening scene, the realistically colored panels constitute the main diegetic level of the narrative and the red-tinted panels represent the *subworld* of the policeman's thoughts. A subworld is a connected set of actions that are related to the main plot but are generated by a character's mental activity, introduced by a story-within-the-story, or projected in some other way one level "down" from the primary narrative level. In short, the reader must juggle two separate diegetic levels in this opening sequence. The storyworld in which the detectives are investigating Blake's death constitutes the primary diegetic level, and panels 3, 5, and 7 in figure 1 comprise the subworld projecting Blake's death in the form of a belief, imagination, or memory. To make sense of these different diegetic levels, the reader must construct different contextual frames and switch between them, as required, while reading/viewing this panel sequence.

In the following subsections, I examine the way that Emmott's frame mechanisms clarify how readers negotiate such shifts among diegetic levels—but also how the comics medium may present a challenge to some of her ideas. Specifically, in the three subsections that follow, I will look closely at frame recalls and the medium-specific ways in which comics like *Watchmen* handle analepses, frame repairs, and frame switches. I pay particular attention to metalepsis, which involves the conflation of distinct diegetic levels.

Frame Recalls: Medium-Specific Aspects of Analepsis

In *frame recall*, which Emmott also refers to as a “re-primed frame,” characters originally bound to a frame encountered earlier in the narrative are “re-primed” or recalled. The panels detailing Blake’s murder in figure 1 (panels 2 and 4) reappear later in the narrative on page 26 of episode 2. It’s fairly simple to identify the panel sequences in episode 2 as the recall of panels in episode 1 because the images are repeated exactly (e.g. the third panel on page 2 of episode 1 reappears in the fourth panel on page 26 of episode 2). While the verbal text accompanying these images varies—in the first instance the detectives discuss their hypotheses about Blake’s murder whereas in the second sequence extracts from Rorschach’s journal accompany the images—the angles, perspectives, and even the red tint of the panels are the same in the original and the recalled panels. However, recognizing a recalled frame in *Watchmen* is not always as simple as this example suggests.

There are numerous instances in the narrative in which recalled frames appear, but they are difficult to identify for a variety of reasons. For example, the level switch may not be indicated in either the verbal or visual track, the scene may be presented from a different point of view, or particular elements may be absent in the recalled frame (e.g. only part of the dialogue may be recalled). A complex example from the text indicates how challenging it can be for readers to identify a recalled frame. In figure 2, it’s difficult to definitively ascertain panel 2’s original appearance. The panel with the speech bubble that directly corresponds with Rorschach’s speech in the second panel in figure 2 can also be found in the fourth panel on page 12 (in episode 1). In the original panel in episode 1, both Rorschach and Dan are facing forward, Dan standing behind Rorschach and suggesting that he is paranoid. However, the recalled panel only shows Rorschach from the neck up and Dan from mid-waist up. In the panel in episode 1, it

is not possible to discern whether Dan is holding the smiley-face pin outstretched in his hand, as he is in the recalled panel in figure 2.

Panel 4 in figure 2 originally appears in the sixth panel on page 24 in episode 3, the original panel offering a view of Rorschach's profile as he stands at the foot of Dan's bed. Dan has a sorrowful frown on his face while Rorschach samples his *Nostalgia* cologne. In the recalled panel 4 in figure 2, the perspective is Dan's. He sees himself reflected in the mirror this time, Rorschach's face obscured by his own hand. The recalled panels in episode 7 appear to be a view of the same scene featured in the sixth panel on page 24 in episode 3, but from Dan's perspective instead of an external focalizer's. There are several important differences between the two panels. The first is that Dan's facial expression in panel 4 of figure 2 is more accurately described as "horrificed" as opposed to "sorrowful"—he is not merely frowning, but his mouth is gaping open. The incongruity between Dan's facial expressions could indicate that the focalizer of episode 3 interpreted Dan's expression in a markedly different way than Dan, the focalizer of episode 7, did. In other words, even though the scene is being recalled, the reader can detect a different focalizer because of the way Dan is depicted. Additionally, the text boxes are different. In panel 6 on page 24 of episode 3, the first two balloons are connected by a typological ellipsis. The third balloon appears by itself lower in the panel. In panel 4 in figure 2, by contrast, all three text balloons are connected, the second and third separated from the first and second by a definitive grammatical period. The physical layout of the text also varies between panel 6 of episode 3 and panel 4 in figure 2. Through an analysis of the speech and thought representations and issues of focalization in this panel sequence, the reader concludes that panel 4 in figure 2 is part of an analepsis, and not a part of the primary diegetic level, as she may have previously believed.

The scene portrayed in panel 6 in figure 2 originally appears in panel 7 on page 24 of episode 3. In the first presentation of this panel (in episode 3), the perspective is from just over Dan's shoulder; the reader sees Dan reading the paper that Rorschach has delivered to him with the news of Dr. Manhattan's departure from Earth. Rorschach is in the background, asking "You?" The image of Rorschach asking this question also appears in the repeated panel—panel 6 in figure 2. His second speech bubble reads, "By the way, you need a stronger lock. That new one broke after one shove" (episode 3, page 24, panel 7). The second instance of this panel is a close-up of Rorschach's face, with only the question, "You?" This moment is almost metaleptic because the way Rorschach is presented suggests that he's addressing not Dan, but rather the reader. In any case, because most of the content—both visual and verbal—from the original panel is absent, it's challenging for the reader to identify this scene as a representation of a previous interaction. It is also interesting to consider Rorschach's entire speech from the original panel in episode 3: his comment about the flimsy lock could support the theory that he is physically present in the scenes with Dan in figure 2, having succeeded in breaking the lock once again. Throughout the narrative, Rorschach is also a harbinger of bad news about the Watchmen's fates; he arrives at Dan's, uninvited, to inform him of both the Comedian's murder and of Dr. Manhattan's departure, so it seems fitting that he might appear to signal misfortune for Laurie and potentially Dan as well. In short, an understanding of Rorschach's character lends an air of believability to these possible scenarios or ways of interpreting the sequence; in turn, the multiple ways of framing the sequence hinder readers' attempts to untangle the time-line for the events shown in in figure 2.

It's particularly difficult to place these panels in time because there aren't visual or verbal cues that mark a shift in worlds. In verbal narratives, analepses, prolepses, and other departures

from the main diegetic level are often identified by a verbal trigger (such as “he remembered” or “she recalled”) or by a break between paragraphs, be it a space or the use of symbols or icons. In other graphic novels, such as Daniel Clowes’s *Ghost World*, the reader detects a shift in worlds because the appearance of the enactors (such as the protagonist, Enid Coleslaw) changes: in a scene preceding a particular analepsis, Enid is clad in a pleather cat-suit. In the next frame, she’s dressed in her everyday attire and talking to her friend Josh in front of Adam’s II, an adult bookstore (Clowes 33). Because both Enid’s physical appearance and the setting change in these panels, the reader deduces that the levels shift in the panels in question. By contrast, in the panels from *Watchmen* that I have been discussing, only a few days elapse between the original event and Dan’s recollection. Therefore, his appearance has not changed noticeably and further, he is pictured in only one of the three repeated panels in episode 7. In keeping with the trend of superhero comics, the characters in *Watchmen* typically wear the same outfit throughout the story, which makes it difficult for the reader to rely on characters’ physical appearances—or their enactors—to determine timelines. This example is especially challenging because the analeptic panels are recalls of panels from two different episodes in the narrative. After the reader realizes that panels 2, 4, and 6 in figure 2 are not part of the primary diegetic level, she has to reorganize her contextual frames accordingly. At issue, here, is a process that Emmott terms a *frame repair*; this frame mechanism is the focus of my next section.

Frame Repairs

Emmott suggests that a *frame repair* occurs “when readers overlook cues to switch contexts and need subsequently to revise the mental frame they have been operating with” (174). Such cues

may include verbal indicators that levels are shifting, a new narrator designation (for instance, Ian McEwan identifies a different narrator in each chapter of his novel *Atonement*), or the misinterpretation of pronoun use. After the reader realizes that she has incorrectly understood the narrative, she is compelled to rearrange the details in the contextual frames she has developed so that they accurately reflect the new interpretive model. There are numerous instances in *Watchmen* that are likely to require repairs of this sort. Again, as I did in my previous subsection, before examining a particularly difficult panel sequence, I'll discuss one panel sequence in which the reader is easily able to identify cues that may have misled her originally.

By the time the reader reaches episode 7, she has been able to establish a chronology of events. The time and date stamps on both Rorschach's and Dr. Long's journal entries, as well as the use of calendar graphics throughout the work, facilitate this process. Although the text features many analepses as well as Dr. Manhattan's proleptic visions of the future, the narrative has seemingly followed a chronological timeline. When this order is violated in episode 7, frame repairs come into play.

Episode 6 ends with Malcolm and Gloria Long's disastrous dinner party on October 28th, 1985. The couple's friends innocently inquire about Long's current case with Rorschach, and the psychiatrist proffers a gruesome response, making his guests uncomfortable and causing Gloria to storm out of the dining room. Because the reader has been given little reason to believe that the episodes aren't running in chronological order, she makes this assumption about the temporal relationship between episodes 6 and 7 as well (i.e. that the events in episode 7 take place during the calendar days directly following October 28th, 1985). However, the television news anchor in panel 3 on page 12 of episode 7 states that "Dr. Malcolm Long, carrying out the examination, has his first interview with Kovacs this afternoon." If the reader recalls Dr. Long's journal entry

from his first meeting with Kovacs, she will note that this meeting took place on October 25th (episode 6, page 1, panel 1). Therefore, episode 7 cannot begin on October 28th or 29th, which one may have assumed at the beginning of the episode. Through the various uses of time identifiers, the reader is able to determine that episode 7 does not follow episode 6 chronologically. When the reader makes this deduction, she relies on the mechanism that Emmott describes as frame repair to restructure the contextual frames she has established. This sequence doesn't challenge Emmott's model, then. Rather, by readjusting which contextual frame she assumes to be primed, the reader can successfully situate the events the events portrayed in episode 7 on the main time-line of the narrative.

The complex example I discussed in my section on frame recalls is also a pertinent example of the process of frame repair. If the reader understandably misread the panels in figure 2 and assumed that Rorschach had escaped from Sing Sing, she could plausibly continue to follow this assumed plotline until the end of episode 7. In the seventh panel on page 28 of episode 7, Dan suggests freeing Rorschach from prison, which indicates that panels 2, 4, and 6 in figure 2 cannot be part of the primary diegetic level. Once the reader realizes in the seventh panel that Rorschach remains incarcerated, she can look for alternate explanations for the relationship between the panels in figure 2. She will subsequently conclude that an analeptic shift is involved; in determining this, the reader begins to understand the narrative in a new way. She now has to monitor the storyworld evoked in panels 2, 4, and 6 as separate from the primary storyworld projected via the other panels in figure 2. Further, she must associate the analepsis in panel 2 with a different contextual frame than the one presented in panels 4 and 6. Emmott terms this process a *frame switch* (see my next subsection).

The sequence detailed above generates productive questions about the relationship between frame recalls and frame repairs as well as questions about the fit between multichannel narratives and Emmott's model. I suggest that the main interpretive difficulty presented by this sequence lies in recalling frames, rather than in making a frame repair per se. As suggested above, the reader is easily able to deduce from the seventh panel on page 28 of episode 7 that Rorschach is still imprisoned and that he could not have been in Dan's house on page 3 of episode 7. But it is more of a challenge to recall the exact location of the previous instances of panels 2, 4, and 6 in figure 2.

Panels that trigger a frame repair may be likened to a safety feature that ensures that the reader interprets the events of the narrative appropriately (in terms of chronology). Because level shifts are often ambiguous in *Watchmen*, panels like the seventh one on page 28 of episode 7 are helpful in rerouting the reader along the narrative timeline. The mental process of repairing frames is straightforward enough, even in a multimodal medium; that said, however, the reader must rely on different sorts of cues to effect repairs than the cues that support this mechanism in single-channel print texts. Hence the study of frame repairs in complex graphic narratives such as *Watchmen* can be seen as part of a broader investigation of how medium-specific textual cues support the frame mechanisms identified by Emmott. It may be that some media do not support such mechanisms for repairing contextual frames; but then the question is whether those media support storytelling itself.

Frame Switches and the Dynamics of Narrative Metalepsis

Frame switches occur when “the reader ceases to directly monitor one frame and starts monitoring another frame. Frame switch can change from one context in a fictional world to another or the switch may also be from the fictional world into the fictional imagination of one of the characters” (Emmott 147-9). Relevant to process of frame switching in *Watchmen* is the narratological idea of metalepsis. Gérard Genette defines a *metalepsis* as “a paradoxical contamination between the world of the telling and the world of the told...Any intrusion by the extradiegetic narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe” (Genette 234-5). This idea is important for understanding *Tales of the Black Freighter*, a comic that a young boy named Bernie, situated at the primary diegetic level, reads throughout *Watchmen*. Images and verbal narration from this comic are presented within the main text of the narrative, in a way that leads to metaleptic effects. In turn, Emmott's concept of frame switches can help illuminate the effects in question.

The excerpts from *Tales of the Black Freighter* serve various narrative purposes. Sometimes the comic appears to be merely a story about a man who is shipwrecked and is trying to discover a way to return home to his family. Other times, the panels from the comic alternate with panels from the main diegetic level of *Watchmen* and the narration from one level will frame the other; such a presentation is known as montage formatting. This use of the comic-within-the-comic can create metaleptic blends between the primary storyworld and the subworld opened up by the boy's reading of *Tales of the Black Freighter*. Figure 3 captures a moment where the narrative metaleptically conflates the main diegetic level and the subworld of the embedded pirate comic⁹. The main diegetic level in these panels is a conversation between the newsvendor and the adolescent boy who is reading the newest episode of the comic. To mark the entrance to the hypodiegetic or embedded narrative presented via the comic-within-the comic,

the authors use scroll-like text boxes on a background that looks like torn parchment paper. These text boxes differ from the typical speech bubbles that are part of the main diegetic level. From the speech bubbles in the first panel in this sequence, it is evident that the newsvendor is anxious about the violence brewing in the city. *Watchmen* uses the comic-in-the-comic to set up a parallel subworld, with one of the scroll-like text boxes evoking fear in its declaration that “At death’s approach, all creatures discover an aptitude for violence” (episode 10, page 13, panel 1).

Readers must interpret these two narratives separately from one another, but also interpret each in terms of the other. In panel 6 of figure 3, two “fanatics” try to interest the newsvendor in their publication and the narration from the pirate comic is superimposed over the panel portraying this event: “the notion fascinated me. It was terrible and yet terribly convenient...” The fascinating notion could refer either to the comic book character’s plan to sneak back into his hometown, Davidstown, or to the fanatic’s idea that God will shortly end the world (episode 10, page 13)—or to both. The expression on the newsvendor’s face in this panel could be interpreted as “fascinated” and furthermore, the reader doesn’t know that he *isn’t* thinking what the narration here suggests. The very act of alternating the narrative levels suggests a metaleptic fusion of the events occurring in these two worlds.

Indeed, even though the setting and enactor sets differ across these two levels or worlds, it can be tricky for the reader to keep the storyworlds separate from one another. The *Black Freighter* comic panels have a pixel-like quality that the main level lacks, but the colors and perspectives are similar. Further, the speech bubbles and narration boxes are the same for both levels. The reader can rely on the visual tracks to differentiate between levels, but there is an overwhelming sense of doom present at both levels that unites them. While the reader can manage the switches between storyworlds, the similar use of colors and perspectives and the

underlying theme of doom suggest that, in a certain sense, readers are being prompted to blend the two worlds even as they switch back and forth between them.

When this example is put into dialogue with Emmott's model, some complicated issues arise. Emmott's very definition of a *frame switch* posits that the reader stops (directly) monitoring one frame so that she might begin monitoring another. In the panels I discuss above, the reader can't stop monitoring the panels situated in *The Black Freighter* when she starts monitoring the ones set in New York City because an element from the first—in this case, the scroll-like text boxes—necessitates that the previous panel remain primed. As I suggested earlier in this chapter, a medium-specific aspect of comics (one that sets graphic narratives apart from the print narratives on which Emmott based her model) is its ability to support more than one primed panel at a time. In turn, the existence of two simultaneously primed panels presents a challenge for Emmott's model.

Although figure 3 challenges Emmott's model and necessitates new scholarship, there are panel sequences in the narrative in which the reader switches between panels in the way Emmott details in her theory. On page 3 of episode 4, Dr. Manhattan has traveled to Mars and is recollecting a conversation with his father when he was a teenager. A text box in the first panel sets the scene, establishing that "It is August 7th, 1845. The Brooklyn morning is humid and the fire escape door has been left open" (episode 4, page 3). The next five panels play out as a conversation between the young Dr. Manhattan and his father. The use of speech bubbles in this sequence suggests that the reader has fully switched from the diegetic level of "grown-up" Dr. Manhattan on Mars to the remembered diegetic level of his childhood home. There are no metaleptic or quasi-metaleptic intrusions besides the text box in panel 1. The reader is able to

easily and successfully switch from one diegetic level to another one, exemplifying the process that Emmott describes as a frame switch.

More generally, it is clearly not the case that all comics and graphic novels challenge Emmott's model. Earlier in this chapter I discussed a scene from Clowes' *Ghost World* in which Enid visits an adult bookshop. This panel is embedded in the main diegetic level in which she is on the phone with Becky. Enid tells Becky that she and Josh went to Adam's II, and after Becky demands that Enid tell her all about it, the reader enters the subworld introduced by Enid's recounting that experience. In this instance, as in the panel sequence on page 3 of episode 4 from *Watchmen*, the reader switches from the world of the main diegetic level (Enid and Becky's phone conversation) to the analepsis of her and Josh's visit to Adam's II. But again, other graphic sequences exploit the multimodal medium of comics to prime two frames simultaneously, prompting what might be termed "frame blends" rather than "frame switches."

As suggested by my analysis of figure 3 in this subsection, the reader cannot confidently determine which diegetic level is primed. Put another way, she cannot distinguish whether—or, if—one of the two levels is the dominant focus of the narrative. Blending embedding and embedded storyworlds, the panels in figure 3 are entwined in such a way that it's difficult to consider them independently of one another¹⁰. Other aspects of complex graphic narratives like *Watchmen* may require further adjustment of Emmott's model, insofar as these texts extend and diversify the corpus on which Emmott's original account was based.

Conclusion

My discussion suggests how Emmott's theory of contextual frames provides important insights into *Watchmen*, even as the text suggests the need to adjust the scope and delicacy of Emmott's model. For example, Emmott's concept of enactors helps clarify how readers model relationships between panels. In the opening panels in episode 1, alternating frames present Blake while he is alive and after he is dead; acknowledging these different participant statuses helps readers differentiate narrative levels. However, because the action of the narrative takes place within the span of a few weeks, there is relatively little change in the characters' appearances. And because of the text's use of a visual as well as a verbal track, different enactors are not always easy to distinguish.

More broadly, although the idea of contextual frames is a powerful one and helps shed light on important features of *Watchmen*, the text also demonstrates how aspects of Emmott's theory need to be adjusted when brought to bear on narratives told in words and images. Because Emmott's theory was created on the basis of traditional print narratives, she emphasizes the importance of verbal signifiers and triggers in making sense of a narrative. In such texts, verbal cues are often used to denote analepses and prolepses. This is not always the case with graphic novels; thus, as discussed in my analysis of frame recalls, the reader must rely on her memory (or a deliberate search back through the text) to identify the analepses at issue. In *Watchmen* especially, there is very little extradiegetic verbal narration: the bulk of the text is in the form of thought bubbles and speech boxes, the supplementary "documents" at the end of the episodes, and excerpts from Rorschach's and Malcolm Long's journals. Because there are relatively few verbal triggers signaling a shift in narrative levels, the reader has to use visual cues, and these can sometimes be ambiguous. The process of recalling a panel is further complicated by the genre-specific use of superhero costumes. The costume uniformity of the characters makes it

nearly impossible to rely on a character's physical appearance to determine narrative timelines. I suggest that this particular challenge is only relevant in a specific subgenre of comics and graphic novels, because other comics—such as Clowes' *Ghost World*—feature characters whose appearances do change over the course of the narrative and who thus can be more readily situated within storyworld chronology.

Of the components of Emmott's contextual frame theory that I discussed in this chapter, her idea of frame repairs was the only one that didn't run into significant challenges when put into dialogue with panel sequences of *Watchmen*. That said, my analysis suggested a significant relationship between Emmott's frame recalls and frame repairs. Repairs come into play if the reader fails to recall frames (if, for example, the level shift is ambiguous), thus serving as a safety feature that works to ensure that the reader works to untangle the complicated time-lines of the narrative. When it comes to frame switches, in the case of a clearly demarcated subworld, Emmott's model retains its validity. However, entwined panels like those that feature in figure 3 do suggest that we consider how narratives with a visual track may be able to prime two contextual frames simultaneously—in a way that is not possible in a print narrative.

Emmott's contextual frame theory thus provides a helpful basis for thinking about the relationships among panels in comics and graphic narratives, even as complex, extended graphic narratives like *Watchmen* suggest the need to revisit specific aspects of her account. Her ideas will be most helpful in texts marked by extensive verbal narration from which the reader can determine time-frames and character referents, or in graphic novels that depict the changing physical appearance of the characters (for instance, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* or Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*). Because there is relatively little narration in *Watchmen* and because the reader must make connections among panels based on the visual track *and* the speech and

thought representations, building contextual frames can be more of a challenge than it is in other instances of the medium. An important task for future research is to explore how other aspects of *Watchmen*—and other multilayered instances of the comics medium—might be brought into a productive dialogue with Emmott's framework, in ways that benefit both comics studies and research on storytelling across media.

Possible Worlds Theory, the Principle of Minimal Departure, and Alternate History in *Watchmen*

In this chapter, I explore possible worlds theory (PWT), drawing on scholarship by Marie-Laure Ryan and by theorists whose work Ryan leverages in her foundational contributions to the field. In the first section, I focus on the relevance of the concept of possible worlds for the analysis of fictional texts. In the second section, I turn to Ryan's principle of minimal departure, which holds that unless textually cued to do otherwise, the reader will assume that elements of the textual world are the same as corresponding elements in the world in which she lives. As I do in my first chapter, I explore the ways that *Watchmen* can be illuminated via ideas from possible worlds theory even as I explore how aspects of this complex multimodal text challenge these ideas. In my third section, I also discuss the genre of alternative or counterfactual history and explore how PWT can be brought into dialogue with this genre as it manifests itself in *Watchmen*.

To expand on this initial summary, my first section explores several major challenges that the comic and graphic narrative medium in general and *Watchmen* in particular pose for PWT. First I discuss a feature I have termed the *simultaneity effect*, which arises from a particular aspect of multichannel media: namely, the possibility that the verbal track may project a world at the same time that the visual track projects a different aspect of that world, or a different world altogether. While related to Thierry Groensteen's concept of braiding, the simultaneity effect is also related to an issue I presented in my first chapter: the possibility of a multimodal narrative containing multiple primed frames (or storyworld scenarios) at one time. In the section in which

I discuss this idea, I suggest potential uses and benefits of the simultaneity effect, but I also raise important questions about the relationship between a medium with verbal and visual tracks, on the one hand, and issues of world construction, on the other hand.

My second section explores how comics provide medium-specific means of travel within the textual universe. Specifically, the simultaneity effect allows for a new speed, or mode, of transuniversal travel that may be likened to Dr. Manhattan's teleportation in *Watchmen*. To illustrate my point, I use Blake's murder sequence, which appears three times throughout the narrative. The section also explores another issue raised by the medium: the possibility of restricted access to a world. To demonstrate this idea, I analyze a sequence that incorporates a complex embedding of subworlds, to draw on a term used in my previous chapter. In this section, I raise questions about speech and thought representation and the relationships between the verbal and visual tracks in instances when they are complicated by the recursive embedding of storyworlds. A graphic novel's capacity to visually present a subworld within another subworld raises questions about which characters are given access to particular aspects of these embedded worlds.

Finally, following my discussion of possibilities for transuniversal travel in the comics medium, I turn to Ryan's principle of minimal departure (PMD) vis-à-vis the genre of counterfactual history. Focusing on *Watchmen*'s hybrid generic status, and specifically the way it combines features of the superhero and alternate history genres, I suggest how complex texts like *Watchmen* may lie outside the scope of Ryan's account. Indeed, because of its complex generic profile, *Watchmen* is difficult to use as a case study for examining the PMD's relationship to comics. However, I do suggest that this relationship is an important one to explore and propose that it be examined by looking at other instances of the comics medium.

Possible Worlds Theory

PWT provides Ryan with a larger framework for her discussion of the PMD. In this section, I synopsise Ryan's model, alluding to some of the theorists whose work she draws on and focusing special attention on her idea of fictional recentering and the PMD.

Before delving into the specifics of the possible worlds model in this section and Ryan's principle of minimal departure in the next, let me list some of the key concepts (and abbreviations for them) used by Ryan. My list is adapted from Ryan's legend, on pages vi-viii in

Possible Worlds:

- **Textual universe**: The image of a system of reality projected by a text. The textual universe is a modal system if one of its worlds is designated as actual and opposed to the other worlds of the system.
- **AW**: The actual world, center of our system of reality. AW is the world where I am located. Absolutely speaking, there is only one AW.
- **APW**: An alternative possible world in a modal system of reality.
- **TRW**: Textual reference world. The world for which the text claims facts; the world in which the propositions asserted by the text are to be valued. TRW is the center of a system of reality comprising APWs.
- **TAW**: Textual actual worlds. The image of TRW proposed by the text. The authority that determines the facts of TAW is the actual sender (author).
- **TAPW**: Textual alternative possible world. An alternative possible world in a textual universe structured as a modal system. TAPWs are textually presented as mental constructs formed by the inhabitants of TAW.

PWT: A Brief History and Outline of the Key Concepts

Lucia Vaina, a theorist who made one of the first systematic attempts to synthesize the conceptual framework of modal logic and textual semiotics, posits that a key feature of possible worlds is their capacity to become embedded in other possible worlds. At one end of Vaina's

spectrum of world-types, a possible world is a “complete state of affairs”; at the opposite end, it is a “course of events” assembled from a series of complete states. In the possible worlds created by narrative fiction, which can be located at various points along this spectrum, “the semantic domain of the narrative text contains a number of subworlds, created by the mental activity of the character” (Ryan 4). Put another way, a narrative is an amalgamation of the main diegetic level and the embedded worlds¹ produced by a character’s mental activities. Ryan put Vaina’s ideas into her own terms, suggesting that the potential for the self-embedding of possible worlds is “a phenomenon of recursive embedding of possible worlds within the textual universe” (Ryan 4).

Such recursive embedding manifests itself in a variety of ways in *Watchmen*. In episode 6 (see figure 4), the reader is granted access to psychiatrist Malcolm Long’s mental activities through excerpts from his journal. Long details his sessions with Rorschach/Walter Kovacs and also includes details about his own personal life, especially as it is affected by his current case. At the main diegetic level of episode 6, Rorschach has finally been apprehended by the police and while he is incarcerated in Sing Sing, he attends psychotherapy sessions. The TAPW of Malcolm Long’s journals constitutes one level of recursive embedding, because his writings don’t constitute the primary diegetic level of the narrative. Instead, they provide a window into Long’s inner thoughts. An additional recursive embedding occurs in episode 6 on page 17 when the reader is propelled into the world recreated from Long’s journal entry for October 28th, 1985 (see figure 4—specifically, page 17, panel 1). To clarify, the reader is already situated in an embedded TAPW via the journal and is about to enter into another TAPW that is embedded *within* the first TAPW opened through Long’s journal entry. In this second embedded TAPW, the reader travels back in time, not through Long’s memory, but rather through one of

Rorschach's recollections. Even though the episode is focalized through Long, it's challenging to determine how much of Rorschach's memory is accessible to the psychiatrist (i.e. which details of this memory Rorschach shares with Long). Later in this section I return to this complicated example of recursive embedding in the text.

Ryan proposes that fictional narratives involve particular kinds of *accessibility relations*—relations that dictate the way TAW may be reached from AW. Different sorts of accessibility relations correspond to different fictional genres. Here an analogy can be drawn between fictional practices and games of make-believe, as described by Kendall Walton. Depending on the “rules” the children establish for the game, the world they create may be one that more or less accurately reflects reality (“playing house”), one that rests within the realm of the fantastic (incorporating dragons, princesses, and castles into the game), or one that Ryan refers to as “Jabberwockism” (in this world, children may create their own unique and nonsensical words for creatures, places, and/or for language in general²). In any case, the relationship between the actual world and the game world depends on factors such as taxonomies of inhabitants, adherence to rules of science and logic, and languages used. In my next subsection, I draw on the idea of accessibility relations to explore the complex acts of fictional recentering cued by *Watchmen*.

Recentering: Traveling between and within Actual and Textual Worlds

How do readers “travel” from the AW to the APW? Ryan suggests that “the presence of a world-creating operators builds a bridge between the actual world and the alternative possible world represented by the propositions that fall under the scope of the operator” (22). Because possible

worlds, like conceptual frames, are constructs of the mind, they can be classified by the mental processes that produce them. The linguist James McCawley posits that these mental processes are triggered, in turn, by world-creating predicates, which are “verbs such as to dream, to intend, to believe, to consider, to fantasize, to hypothesize” (Ryan 19). A challenge for a PWT approach to graphic narratives is to identify and explore the workings of world-creating predicates that are not limited to the verbal channel.

Once the reader has been cued to begin her travel to an APW, the duration of her experience within that work of fiction will be recentered on a new world that the narrator presents as the actual world. Upon entrance into the APW, the reader acknowledges a new system of possibility and reality. In her chapter, Ryan discusses the recentering experience in the terms afforded by Kendall Walton’s “assimilation of fiction to a game of make-believe.” When children engage in games of make-believe, they preface their game with a specific set of rules: “Let’s pretend that I’m a princess and you’re a dragon and you’re trying to eat me. The couch is the bridge and the carpet is lava.” In terms of fiction, Walton’s idea can be understood as “Let’s pretend the facts told by the narrator are true, and the world he describes is the actual world” (Ryan 23). As soon as the children begin to play their game of make-believe, the world-creating operator is dropped. The couch is now a bridge and not an item of furniture posing as a bridge. When reading fiction, the reader understands that the textual universe is a “make-believe” alternative to her system of reality but for the remainder of her reading experience, she behaves as though the world of the textual universe is the actual world. Put another way, when a reader enters into a fictional world, she travels from her AW to the APW. While in the APW, she pretends that it is the AW (of the textual universe) until the end of the narrative, when she will travel from the APW back to the AW. As I go on to discuss, the formal complexities of

Watchmen suggest how two domains of transworld relations must be taken into account in research on fictional recentering. The first is the transuniverse domain, which connects AW to TAW. The second is the intrauniverse domain, which connects TAW to its own alternative worlds, or TAPWs.

In her chapter on fictional recentering, Ryan discusses unique hybrid textual worlds. Such a world is possible when an element or elements from the actual world coexists in an APW. An example of a hybrid world can be found in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. In these books, Rowling's fictional witches and wizards gain entrance to a magical realm through a platform located in King's Cross train station in London. While Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ is a creation of Rowling's imagination, the King's Cross that Harry, Ron, and Hermione visit is a geographically real place (and, as of several years ago, the station actually does have a Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$). Ryan goes on to ask how one decides if a world is fictional, suggesting that "the semantic domain of the text is recognized as fictional when it departs through at least one property from the actual world." Following Ryan's ideas about fictionality, the King's Cross station in the world of the *Harry Potter* books is fictional—even though it exists in the AW—because it belongs to a world that, as a whole, is fictional.

Possible Worlds in *Watchmen*

In a multimodal medium like graphic novels, the reader is able to make connections between worlds through world-building strategies that differ from those that define the realm of print texts. There are numerous panel sequences in *Watchmen* that are examples of embedded narratives and montage formatting that allow the reader to make such connections between

panels. As I discussed in my first chapter, montage formatting occurs when panels constituting different storylines are alternated with one another and share a verbal track. These aspects of the text are related to the idea of possible worlds because in the act of monitoring disparate diegetic levels, the reader travels between APWs in quick succession, and in the process must work to differentiate between (the multiple storylines of) the APW and the TAPWs.

To illustrate my points about the relationship between possible worlds and the ideas of narrative embedding and montage formatting, I refer to the panel sequence in figure 5. While Dr. Manhattan is being interviewed aggressively by Doug Roth, a reporter for the *Nova Express*, Dan and Laurie find themselves trapped in an alley and confronted by the ever-pugnacious Top Knots. The narrative cuts between two storylines: Dr. Manhattan's interview (this part of the storyworld appears in panels 1, 3, and 5 in figure 5), which is marked by speech bubbles, and Dan and Laurie's confrontation with the Top Knots, which is depicted in panels 2, 4, and 6. These three latter panels contain text boxes that refer back to the interview even as the visual track displays scenes from their fight in the alley. If the speech representation in panels 2, 4, and 6 was originating in that particular part of the APW, the speech would appear in speech bubbles and not in text boxes, which is another instance of montage formatting. In this sequence, *Watchmen*'s creators present alternating storylines that are connected through the use of text boxes. When the reader encounters such panels, she should note a variety of connections, including those between individual panels, pages, and larger episodes within the narrative as a whole. Exploring these kinds of connections via Groensteen's concept of *braiding* and a related structure for which I have coined the term *simultaneity effect*, my next subsection explores how these aspects of the comics medium allows for new rules for travel between worlds in the textual universe.

Medium-Specificity: The Simultaneity Effect

A medium-specific aspect of graphic novels—one that distinguishes them from traditional print narratives—is that the reader is allowed to simultaneously observe the unfolding of two narratives. This is the feature I call the *simultaneity effect*, which is related to Thierry Groensteen's concept of *braiding*. Groensteen, a scholar of the Francophone *bande dessinée* tradition, posits that *braiding* is the breakdown of panels into a logical or narrative sequence that may contain certain units, which can be individual panels or a form of a multiframe or hyperframe³. Furthermore, these units can be physically or contextually independent. Braiding, or *tressage*, is Groensteen's term for the way different panels may communicate or relate to one another across more or less extensive stretches of text (Groensteen 30). Such methods may include a repetition of a motif through disparate episodes, the identical reconstruction of a panel but with altered content, or a page layout that is echoed throughout the work. Another way to think about braiding is that a single panel may be related to the panels on either side of it, but it may also be connected to the other panels on the page, in the episode, or to panels elsewhere in the narrative. In a sequence that presents multiple worlds simultaneously, the reader must consider a panel in a variety of relationships: as an autonomous structure in itself, in relationship with the panels directly before and after it, and in terms of the other panels on the page, in the episode, and in the narrative as a whole. This aspect of a multimodal medium allows the reader to “read” two stories at the same time, which isn't always or necessarily possible when she reads a traditional print narrative.

So, what's the benefit of the simultaneity effect and what does it have to do with possible worlds theory? One benefit is the way it can be used to establish a significant connection between multiple plots and to deploy elements of foreshadowing. In the example from *Watchmen* in figure 5, the overlapping text and images suggest that there's a meaningful relationship between the two storylines—Dr. Manhattan's televised interview and Dan and Laurie's street fight. But beyond this, the simultaneity effect allows readers to establish links between specific panels in figure 5 and other panels on this page—as well as still other panels found elsewhere in the narrative. Once the reader arrives at the panels in figure 5, she is already comfortably situated in the APW, which she entered via the introductory panels of the text when she found herself in Edward Blake's apartment shortly after his murder. The TRW—the world for which the textual universe claims facts—is an alternate history set in New York with Richard Nixon serving his fifth term as president. Throughout the narrative, the reader travels between APW and TAPWs. In figure 5 specifically, two aspects of the APW are presented—the one in which Dr. Manhattan's interview is taking place and the other in which Dan and Laurie are confronted by the Top Knots.

In panel 3 in figure 5, Doug Roth, a reporter for *Nova Express*, begins to question Dr. Manhattan about a string of people from his past. In episode 3 on page 14, the reader discovers why Roth is asking after them: they all have cancer. Roth's insinuation is that Dr. Manhattan infected them, supposedly by spending extended periods of time in their company. In panel 5 (in figure 5), the reporter rambles on about Dr. Manhattan's connections to Edward Jacobi, who is also known as Moloch (in episode 2 on page 24 the reader learned that he has cancer). Roth's rant trails off with "...whatever it is you super-people do" (see figure 5). This comment is superimposed over Dan and Laurie's confrontation with the Top Knots in panel 6. Roth identifies

Moloch and Dr. Manhattan as superheroes in the APW of the television interview, but because the text box also narrates the events in Dan and Laurie's APW, they, too, are being "unmasked" against their will.

By inadvertently unmasking Dan and Laurie, Roth also foreshadows later events of the narrative and lends an air of irony to another plot involving the Top Knots. On page 28 of episode 5, the police literally and forcibly unmask Rorschach after a spree of illegal activities. The irony of this scene is realized in episode 8 (pages 26 through 28) when the Top Knots murder Hollis Mason, whom they mistakenly believe to be the active Nite Owl (the panels detailing their faulty identification appear on page 13 in episode 8). This mix-up is ironic because in the scene when Dan is "unmasked" as a superhero—or, as Nite Owl—he is within the Top Knots' grasp.

In the panels in figure 5, the reader travels between different parts of the APW, all the while differentiating between events that are occurring simultaneously—but separately—from one another. The simultaneous presentation of the action occurring in two parts of the APW allows the reader to make meaningful connections between plots that she might not have made in a single-channel narrative (one that either does not or cannot use the simultaneity effect). In addition to making these connections, the reader also discerns elements of foreshadowing, such as Rorschach's unmasking later in the text. However, several interesting questions are suggested by my analysis of this panel sequence: What is the primary diegetic level of the narrative? Because panels 2, 4, and 6 are, in a sense, "framed" by panels 1, 3, and 5, are they therefore part of a satellite world (with Dr. Manhattan's diegetic level serving as the "baseline" APW)? These questions aren't easily answered and suggest that world and diegetic level assignation in

multichannel narratives in general, and in graphic novels in particular, may need to be reexamined in light of the semiotic complexity of such narratives.

In the case of montage formatting and travel between the APW and TAPWs, or the subworlds that arise from a character's beliefs, dreams, or recollections, the TAPW, at least in the instance I will discuss in the next section, is a different world—specifically, a new TAPW—each time it appears. Here, because of the simultaneity effect, the reader can forgo normal interplanetary travel; instead, she can pull a Dr. Manhattan and simply appear in another world. It is travel, as I have been using the term, but I'm suggesting that it's a different mode—or possibly speed—of travel. In my next section, I will explore this issue as well as another new “travel rule” in the textual universe—the idea of restricted access to worlds, which occurs when one character's TAPW is embedded within another character's TAPW and the latter might not have full access to the content of the former TAPW.

Challenging the Model: New Rules for Travel in the Textual Universe

The comics medium suggests the need for developing new rules for what might be called transuniversal travel, or the way that the reader negotiates the space between the worlds that exist in the textual universe. In the panel sequences I analyze here, the reader is grounded in (at least) two worlds because she is unable to fully depart from either, or to enter the other without also remaining in the first. This new mode of travel may be likened to Dr. Manhattan's “teleportation,” or to the idea of apparating⁴ in Rowling's *Harry Potter* books. To explore this issue, I discuss three sequences from the text—specifically, the three representations of Blake's murder.

Blake's murder first plays out in the introductory panels of episode 1 (pages 2 through 4). As I discussed in my first chapter, the reader interprets them as the detective's idea of how Blake's murder happened (i.e. as the TAPW corresponding to his belief-world). When the panels appear a second time in episode 2 (pages 26 through 28), the sequence is blended with memories of Blake's past⁵. The worlds are connected by excerpts from Rorschach's journal, in which he waxes despondent about the violence of humans and the miserable, solitary future that awaits everyone. The second representation of Blake's murder omits several panels and adds several others. The image of Blake's killer preparing to throw him out of the window and the trio of panels depicting his fall from the apartment are absent in episode 2. Instead, episode 2 incorporates three new panels, one of which provides a close-up of Blake's terrified expression before he hits the sidewalk—which is presumably indicated in the uniformly red (or blood-filled) panel on page 28. Meanwhile, the third depiction of Blake's murder in episode 11 (pages 24 through 26) is the shortest of the three sequences. In this instance, the panels alternate with Veidt's explanation of his plan to decimate New York City. The first five panels of Blake's murder are identical to the first five panels in the sequences in episodes 1 and 2. The major change in the representation in episode 11 is the inclusion of a panel (on page 26) identifying Veidt as Blake's killer.

The three times that Blake's murder sequence appears the reader is given a different perspective of the crime. In episode 1, the TAPW is that of the detective's beliefs while in episode 2, the TAPW is more difficult to determine. While the scene may be recalled in order to illustrate Rorschach's ideas about the violence and cruelty of men, Rorschach isn't hypothesizing about the events of Blake's death, in the way he would have if the TAPW were the result of his belief-world. The scene can best be characterized as a TAPW created by an analeptic shift back

to the past stage of the primary diegetic level. When this scene is presented a third time in episode 11, it's an example of a TAPW of knowledge or memory—specifically, Veidt's recollection of killing Blake. Hence, by attending to the panels that are omitted or added to the sequence, the reader is able to determine that Blake's murder is presented in three different TAPWs.

The common link between the three representations of these panels is that in all of them, the event of Blake's murder is not independent—i.e. it isn't a world that exists on its own. In episode 1, the detective's hypothetical statements connect the events of the APW to the primary storyworld; these statements appear in text boxes within the TAPW. In episode 2, the use of excerpts from Rorschach's journal binds the verbal track to the TAPW created by the analeptic shift back to the depiction of Blake's murder. Finally, in episode 11, the text boxes that appear in the TAPW introduced via Veidt's memory link those very panels to the panels of the primary diegetic level in which he recounts his plan to bring destruction upon New York City. These relationships indicate that the reader doesn't ever completely leave the APW and travel to a TAPW; rather, she is still bound to the APW. To put the same point another way, the reader is rooted in both the APW and the TAPW, observing two different time frames in much the same way as Dr. Manhattan does—that is, simultaneously.

Restricted Access

In my discussion of Vaina's idea of recursive embedding earlier in this chapter, I referred to Malcolm Long's psychotherapy session with Rorschach (in episode 6). I identified a complicated relationship between the APW, the TAPW produced by the excerpts from Long's journal, and

the TAPW of Rorschach's memory of a young girl's kidnapping and subsequent murder. I can now return to this relationship in more detail, by focusing on the use of speech and thought representation in these panels.

On page 17 in figure 4, Long holds up an inkblot card and urges Rorschach to tell him what he sees, to which he replies, "Dog. Dog with head split in half." On page 18, Rorschach begins to tell the story of a young girl—Blaire Roche's—disappearance and how he decided to investigate it. The first three panels on page 18 take place in the APW, with Rorschach proffering details of the girl's kidnapping to Long. Panels 4 through 7 (on page 18) constitute the TAPW associated with the account of the investigation that Rorschach conveys to Long, as is evidenced by the use of text boxes in these panels. The rest of the panels on page 18, all of the panels on pages 19-20, and the first five panels on page 21 do not use the verbal track, and in the remaining panels of this sequence, the verbal track, if present, is composed of speech bubbles. The techniques for speech and thought representation used in these panels raise a number of questions about the relationship between the comics medium and the idea of transuniversal travel, or travel from one narrative world to another.

A key question concerns the relationship among worlds; complications arise from the challenge of determining which characters are privy to which details in which world(s). In her chapter on fictional recentering, Ryan points out that "speech acts always take place in the actual world for their participants" (22). Because speech acts occur in the world in which they are produced, the reader may deduce that the dialogue exists in Rorschach's TAPW but *not* in Long's TAPW. Therefore, how does the reader know how much of Rorschach's recollection is communicated to Long? Because the recollection occurs within a TAPW embedded within Long's own TAPW, does the text suggest that Long "sees" everything that Rorschach relays to

the reader through his analepsis? Even though this TAPW is created through the TAPW resulting from Long's journal entry, this new TAPW is Rorschach's. One could argue that Rorschach and the reader know more than Long does; even though this TAPW is presented within Long's TAPW, Long himself isn't necessarily granted access to all of the material.

More generally, to what extent, in comics storytelling, do visually portrayed acts take place in the actual world for their participants? Put another way, who is given access to the images in the panels on pages 18-21, for which there is no verbal track? Rorschach does disclose snippets of his recollection to Long, such as on page 21 when he details how he found Roche's kidnapper or on page 26 when he rants cryptically and describes the metamorphosis he felt that night, but these are not especially graphic revelations. Instead, the particularly gruesome and gory aspects of his story are imparted through the visual track. Regardless, Long appears shaken on page 26 when Rorschach is led away after their session, which implies that Rorschach disclosed more than is suggested by the use of text boxes and speech bubbles. However, another possible interpretation of this sequence is that the panels without a verbal track are the product of Long's imaginative reliving of those scenes on the basis of the verbal cues that Rorschach provides. Because of the complicated relationship between the verbal and visual tracks and the speech and thought representations used in these panels, the reader cannot unequivocally decide in favor of either explanation.

In the present section, I have explored how complicated instances (or modes) of recursive embedding in graphic narratives may require a recalibration of the tools developed under the auspices of PWT. In my next section, I turn to a consideration of how another aspect of the theory, namely, the principle of minimal departure, can be brought into productive dialogue with complex graphic novels such as *Watchmen*.

***Watchmen* and the Scope of the PMD**

Watchmen is intriguing to consider in terms of PMD because the expectations of the readers in 1986 are much different than they are now. In the 80s, a comic book reader expected to open the pages of the newest *X-Men* installment and to see the costume-clad Cyclops, Rogue, and Storm battling the relapsed-villain Magneto. In the past five to ten years especially, the subject matter of comic books has begun to evolve. Now comics aren't only of the Batman, Superman, and X-Men sort; they also engage in sophisticated explorations of "mature" themes. Graphic novels can be products of journalistic reporting, like Joe Sacco's *Safe Area Goražde* (2000), a "tragicomic" cum memoir like Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006), or a female Bildungsroman, à la Daniel Clowes' *Ghost World* (1997). When a reader opens a comic or graphic novel today, she doesn't automatically assume that she'll find herself enveloped in the world of superheroes. Instead, she could find herself in rural Pennsylvania, bearing witness to Bruce Bechdel's mercurial mood swings or she could find herself witnessing Enid Coleslaw and Becky Doppelmeyer's cruel prank on Bob Skeetes. Whereas the physical existence of a comic book in the 1980s automatically triggered a recentering to a more or less fantastic storyworld, today's comics reader doesn't necessarily follow the same rules for travelling among worlds.

Ryan's principle of minimal departure (PMD) helps get at some of the differences involved in readers' orientations to comics in 2011 versus 1986. The PMD is a name for the interpretive process that allows the reader to travel from her own system of reality to a textual universe. Depending on what kind of textual universe the reader travels to, she will entertain a

particular set of expectations and beliefs about that modal universe. In her model, Ryan posits that the principle of minimal departure

states that we reconstrue the central world of a textual universe in the same way we reconstrue the alternate possible worlds of nonfactual statements: as conforming as far as possible to our representation of AW. We will project upon these worlds everything we know about reality, and we will make only the adjustments dictated by the text. (Ryan 51)

By way of a preliminary demonstration of the relevance of the PMD, I'll briefly discuss Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, which I referred to in the previous section. I then turn to a more focused discussion of how the PMD bears on specific panel sequences from *Watchmen*.

Because the textual universe of Rowling's *Harry Potter* series is a fantasy world, the reader accepts that the series' magical characters are able to cast spells, and to defy rules of science by apparating or by becoming invisible while shrouded in an enchanted cloak; they may also be able to turn into animals (or into other people with the aid of a Polyjuice potion). Furthermore, while immersed in this fiction, the reader accepts that this wizarding world contains a different inventory of human or quasi-human inhabitants (witches, wizards, giants, and werepeople, to name a few) and a different taxonomy of nonhuman creatures (such as hippogriffs, dragons, and three-headed dogs). The PMD suggests how readers make sense of the *Harry Potter* storyworld by registering the ways in which that world differs from the AW, and assuming that if the text does not indicate a difference along a particular dimension, then there is overlap between the AW and the APW—and for that matter the various subworlds contained within the APW.

Thus, while Harry Potter's world is filled with objects, people, and places that are unique to its textual universe, there are other items that Rowling doesn't describe because they are the same as items in the inventory of AW. The library at Hogwarts, the wizarding school in the

series, is like any library in AW: it's a place where books are kept and where students go to study. Even though pumpkin juice and butterbeer didn't exist in AW at the time when the first books were published, the reader could deduce that these beverages are meant to be consumed orally, as they are in AW. Ryan posits that even though an author leaves a gap in the narrative (Rowling doesn't explicitly elucidate the proper use of Hogwarts' library), these "gaps in the representation of the textual universe are regarded as withdrawn information, and not as ontological deficiencies of this universe itself" (Ryan 53). However, if there are so many different elements in Harry Potter's textual universe, why does the reader assume that his library is the same kind of library that we'd find in AW? This assumption is precisely what Ryan seeks to explain through the PMD.

Ryan suggests that once we have traveled into a textual universe, we will assume that the specifics of its worlds are the same as in AW, unless we are signaled to do otherwise. Upon entering a textual universe, we create a certain landscape, which we populate with people, places, laws, and other world-markers. Ryan posits that, acknowledging intertextuality, PMD rejects the idea that textual worlds are created *ex nihilo*. Instead, "TAW [or the world that determines the facts of the fictional universe for the characters in it] is a priori populated, not with objects found in AW, but with the creatures characteristic of what may be called a 'generic landscape'" (Ryan 55). For this reason, we recognize that because *Watchmen* falls into the superhero genre—at least a postmodern rewrite of this genre, Dr. Manhattan is able to defy science and teleport (even to Mars), that Dan successfully constructed an Owl Ship, and that two generations of costumed heroes sought to save the world. A reader accepts this "pre-population" of the fictional world because, as Ryan details, generic subworlds coalesce through "a process of filtration: we gather their elements from the themes and objects characteristic of a certain corpus" (55). In the next

section, I'll consider specific aspects of *Watchmen* in terms of Ryan's model, paying particular attention to the relationship between genre and the PMD.

Putting Ryan's Principle into Dialogue with *Watchmen*

One might assume that it would be fairly straightforward to put Ryan's model into dialogue with specific panel sequences from *Watchmen*. However, as this project has proven repeatedly, *Watchmen* is a very complex text—indeed, it isn't just a superhero comic, but rather, a postmodern rewrite of a superhero comic. As I noted in chapter 1, a postmodern rewrite is a type of intertextuality that critiques, rather than imitates, the work to which it refers. The text's dual classification complicates the reader's ability to establish a generic landscape and to populate the textual universe accordingly. As a hybrid genre, *Watchmen* suggests how implementing the PMD can be tricky in particular cases—since one can't assume that a characteristic that holds true in one genre relevant for interpreting the text will necessarily hold true in another that is also relevant.

Even though the text contains elements of the superhero genre, Dr. Manhattan is the only character with real superpowers (Veidt may be considered a quasi-superhero because of his superior strength and agility); for this reason, the reader can't expect that all of the characters will be able to do "superhero" things. While Rorschach demonstrates a knack for breaking-and-entering that seems superhero-like (he managed to find a way into Blake's high-rise apartment, gained access to the secure research facility where Dr. Manhattan and Laurie were living at the time, and repeatedly broke into both Dan and Moloch's houses), other characters such as Laurie

and Blake seem to be normal people that are simply good in a skirmish. In light of these conclusions, how well does Ryan's principle hold in a blended genre like *Watchmen*?

In the case of *Watchmen*, the reader must consider what is possible in the superhero realm and what is possible in a quasi-realistic alternate history of the AW in which we live. I argue that the conflation of genres challenges Ryan's model and may require a recalibration of that model in order for it to be able to encompass a hybrid genre like *Watchmen*. Because different genres cue readers to assume that the textual universe will contain particular kinds of taxonomies, demonstrate adherence to certain laws, and support selective possibilities, the reader's ability to make deductions about the textual universe will be complicated by the incorporation of more than one genre. When forced to make a decision about the fictional worlds, the reader would have to consider the possibilities afforded in each genre. In order to demonstrate how difficult it is to mobilize the PMD for texts with a hybrid generic profile such as *Watchmen's*, I turn now to a specific point of contention in the text: Blake's murder⁶.

Many of the characters in *Watchmen* draw conclusions about the significance of Blake's untimely demise, but how does the reader decide which conclusion is warranted? When the text is a generic hybrid, combining elements of superhero comics, alternate history, and postmodern rewrites, which TRW—or the world for which the text claims facts—should she refer to? Rorschach suggests that Blake's death is an indication that someone is trying to kill off costumed-heroes. Dan counters him, proposing that it was an "ordinary burglary... Maybe the killer didn't know who Blake was" (episode 1, page 12). In episode 11, the reader discovers that Veidt killed Blake because the latter discovered his plan to decimate New York City in order to achieve world peace. Which TRWs do each of these possibilities belong in, and how can Ryan's model clarify the basis on which a reader might make this decision—or is it unable to do so?

One sort of explanation makes sense in the superhero genre: Veidt killed Blake in order to carry out his evil plan (although his murderous scheme isn't very superhero-like⁷). However, Veidt's murder of Blake, as well as his violent scheme, could also fall into the realm of postmodern rewrite—as could Rorschach's theory of the murder. Superhero assassinations, or “good” superheroes killing other “good” superheroes, aren't common themes in the genre. While Batman might have killed Penguin or the Joker, he wouldn't have killed Robin. Finally, Dan's real-world supposition that Blake's murder was a burglary had nothing to do with the characters' statuses as (retired) superheroes. Which of these explanations should carry the most weight? Which explanation would Ryan's model indicate to be the “best” explanation? To answer this question, the reader has to decide which TRW she should use as her frame of reference; however, the polysemic nature of the text doesn't allow her readily to make this decision. Arguably, Ryan's account needs to be adjusted to map out the structures and effects of narratives in which there's more than one TRW (or a blending of genres for which different sorts of TRWs would be appropriate).

Likewise, the complexities of genre-blending are foregrounded in figure 2 from my first chapter, in which Rorschach and Dan present different theories regarding the motives behind the Comedian's mysterious murder. Rorschach's proposes an idea that keeps with the landscape of (a postmodern rewrite of) the superhero genre, while Dan's explanation is more in line with the landscape of an alternate history that is fairly accurately modeled after our own AW. This example suggests that when in the realm of a hybrid genre, the reader may associate certain characters with certain genres. Subsequently, she will expect that character to behave accordingly. In the instance detailed in figure 2, several analepses alternate with the primary diegetic level, in which Dan hears an explosion in the basement and immediately assumes that

Rorschach's suggestion (that someone is killing off costumed heroes) is true and that Laurie is in danger. In my discussion in chapter 1, I proposed a complex scenario in which Rorschach managed to escape from Sing Sing and found an extra "Rorschach costume" before breaking into Dan's house. In actuality, the panels featuring Rorschach in this sequence were only flashbacks. In this instance, given the pertinence of the superhero genre for Rorschach's characterization in the text, wouldn't the reader expect Rorschach to escape from prison and to show up uninvited? He's one of the few characters in the text that takes his superhero status seriously and the reader has grown to expect him to make decisions and to behave accordingly. But this line of interpretation is not warranted by the subsequent unfolding of the narrative. This example again raises the broader question: what happens when a character that has rooted him- or herself in one world doesn't fulfill the reader's expectations of them in that particular world?

***Watchmen* and the Complexities of Alternate History**

As I suggested in my previous section, *Watchmen*'s genre-blending challenges Ryan's PMD because its incorporation of multiple genres makes it difficult for the reader to determine which TRW to use as a basis for decisions about the nature or contours of the textual universe. One of the genres that the text's authors draw on is alternate history, a type of speculative fiction that is set in a world in which one or more historical events unfold differently than they did in the "real world." These stories are quite often set some time after the event—called a "point of divergence" by fans of the genre—and they commonly describe the present world as being significantly changed by the difference between the actual outcome of the hinge-event and what would or could have happened if that event either hadn't happened or if it had happened

differently. In focusing on such a point of divergence, alternate history rewrites history itself, therefore transforming not only the storyworlds it produces but also the reader's understanding of historical realities themselves. As a genre, alternate history "speculates about such topics as the nature of time and linearity, the past's link to the present, the present's link to the future" (Hellekson 4). The topics about which alternate history speculates are topics in which *Watchmen*, too, is deeply invested.

The alternative history genre is a complex one in its composition. It is a subgenre of science fiction, which, in turn, is a subgenre of the fantastic, in the broad sense of that term (Hellekson 3). As such, the genre may allude to scientific advances that would have been implausible and impossible at the time, new taxonomies of worlds, and inherently, altered courses of events. The genre is rooted in reality in that it is concerned with real events and/or people in history, but results in an entirely fictive present and/or future. The reader faces challenges in making a decision about a world that is similar to AW but that also features scientific advances and new species that are not part of any attested reality.

In what follows, I explore the features aligning *Watchmen* with the genre of alternate history and also explore the relevance of the PMD for texts that outline counterfactual versions of the historical record.

Watchmen as Alternate History

Gibbons, Higgins, and Moore's *Watchmen* is set in an alternate United States. In this version of the country in 1985, costumed adventurers are a normal part of society. In the case of an apartment fire, Dan and Laurie appear with the Owl Ship sooner than the fire trucks and firemen.

Other changes to history include an American victory, of sorts, in the Vietnam War (this would be the point-of-divergence) and Richard Nixon serving five terms as president. In this alternate history, the nation edges towards a nuclear war with the Soviet Union, freelance costumed vigilantes have been forced into retirement (or continued to engage in stealthy crime-fighting in Rorschach's case) by the Keene Act in 1977, and a select few operate as government-sanctioned agents. Hellekson asserts that the primary point of an alternate history is to suggest the importance of an event by exploring what the world would be like if it either had not occurred or if it had happened differently (5). Following this logic, is the reader supposed to conclude that if the Americans had been triumphant in the Vietnam War, then costumed superheroes would have infiltrated society and that New York City's population would have been decimated by one of these "heroes"?

The authors don't seem to be suggesting that if the Americans had won the war and if Nixon had served five terms as president, superheroes would have emerged to fight crime (or, in Veidt's case, slaughter millions of New Yorkers). More plausibly, one might interpret the text in two ways: 1.) as a reflection on contemporary anxieties, especially concerning the Cold War and 2.) as a critique of the superhero concept. In situating the world of *Watchmen* securely within a fictional representation of the real world, the authors create an environment that readers are familiar with. By introducing a realistic backdrop for the narrative, the authors are able to highlight how obsolete superheroes are: they perform jobs that firemen and police are responsible for in the AW, or they sneak around in the night, bringing "justice" to criminals. Even though Dr. Manhattan brought about an American victory in the Vietnam War, this triumph eventually allows Veidt to unleash his giant, psychically destructive creation on New York City, killing millions. Thus, rather than proposing that this is the fate that awaited Americans had

events played out differently in the Vietnam War, the authors can be read as juxtaposing a semi-realistic America with a reality in which superheroes exist—for the purpose of highlighting the absurdity of the superhero concept itself. Further, as I discuss in what follows, in a world where the lines between reality fiction are blurred, it may be difficult for the reader to recenter herself in the fictional world and for her to discern the structure of the larger textual universe in which that world is situated.

Alternate History and the Principle of Minimal Departure

To what extent can the PMD account for the complex dynamics of alternate history? I suggest that alternate histories such as *Watchmen* inhibit the reader's willingness to draw conclusions about the textual world based on its distance from our own world. The nature of the genre constitutes a challenging juxtaposition: on one hand, the reader feels centered in the textual universe because (some of) the elements are familiar to her—in the case of *Watchmen*, such elements include New York City, a president as the head of the government, and people that look like the people populating the real world (or rather, the cartoon versions of those people). But on the other hand, the reader soon discovers that these “familiar” elements are actually much different from what she originally thought. The New York City of the text is (presumably) located in New York state and is home to the Statue of Liberty, but the fictive city is rocked by the explosion of Veidt's gigantic creature, which has “a massive brain....cloned from a human sensitive” (episode 11, page 26). The president in the text is a figure that readers recognize—Richard Nixon—but the rules for the presidency have been altered. The two-term rule obviously isn't in effect because the fictional Nixon is in the midst of his fifth term in office as the narrative

plays out. Likewise, whereas at first glance the inhabitants that populate the textual universe might seem to be the same as those that populate AW, the reader soon finds that this inference, too, is incorrect. Among the supposedly normal people are various superheroes. Dr. Manhattan seems to be the real thing; he is a glowing blue color following his accident in Gila Flats, he is able to teleport, and at the President's behest, he intervened in the Vietnam War to bring about an American victory. Rorschach is a quasi-superhero and he seems to have some superhero-like skills, such as his ability to cross boundaries without being caught, but anatomically, he's a regular human being. Other characters like Dan and Laurie have above-average fighting skills, but otherwise, they're ordinary people in superhero costumes.

My point is that because all bets are off about what may or may not have been changed in the text, given the alteration of a hinge-point in history, it becomes more difficult to bring the PMD to bear on the narrative. The reader's ability to make decisions about the textual universe is further complicated by the genre of the postmodern rewrite. If the text was, more simply, a counterfactual history of the United States in the 1980s in which superheroes roamed the streets of New York, the reader would be able to draw conclusions about the textual universe based on her knowledge of the generic landscape of superhero comics—for instance, she would assume that the characters have special powers that allow for flight, invisibility, or x-ray vision, that there's a villain with an evil plan that the superheroes seek to thwart, and that the superheroes wear costumes. While the characters in *Watchmen* do wear costumes and ultimately seek to prevent Veidt's heinous crime, the text draws not on the superhero genre per se, but rather on the genre of the postmodern rewrite. This distinction is important because it indicates that the narrative isn't interested in telling a stereotypical superhero story, but instead in deconstructing that concept. So how do the genres in which *Watchmen* participates impede or block the PMD?

In focusing on a cast of “heroes” that suffer from neuroses and cancer, that experience romantic frustrations, and that use their elevated status for personal gain, *Watchmen*’s creators are critiquing the concept of the superhero instead of imitating it. When superhero elements manifest themselves in the text, the reader faces challenges in deciding what to do with that information. Dr. Manhattan, the only character with true superpowers, is not only unable to prevent the “villain” from slaughtering millions of people, but is outsmarted by that very villain. This example indicates that when a superhero element crops up in the narrative, the reader cannot rely exclusively on her knowledge of the rules for that genre to make inferences about the textual universe. Although Dr. Manhattan has superpowers, he isn’t always inclined to make decisions that one would expect from a superhero—he kills a fellow Watchman in order to cover up Veidt’s crime and is unfaithful to his former girlfriend, Janey Slater. The genre of the postmodern rewrite resituates the landmarks of the superhero genre in order to critique the very concept of the superhero, and because *Watchmen* participates in this genre, the reader is hampered in determining which TRW she should use to make inferences about the textual universe.

The PMD and Alternative History in Comics

Thus, the analyst’s ability to explore how medium-specific aspects of *Watchmen* may challenge Ryan’s concept of the PMD is impeded by the text’s complex generic profile. Use of the principle is affected not so much by medium-specific elements as by the multiple ways in which it might apply to a given textual segment, given the narrative’s participation in multiple genres. Testing how issues of medium bear on the scope and limits of the PMD for graphic narratives thus lies

outside the scope of this project, and will require future research on a larger range of case studies.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the relevance of PWT, including its treatment of the process of fictional recentering and the PMD, for a complex graphic narrative such as *Watchmen*. I suggested that, as a multimodal medium combining words and images, comics allows for what I referred to as the simultaneity effect. In general, this effect makes it possible for the reader to forge new connections between worlds—and affords new modes of transuniversal travel. Because worlds may be presented at the same time and because they are connected quasi-metaleptically (through forms of speech and thought representation), the reader is unable to fully depart from the "base" world and to travel to a new one. Instead, like Dr. Manhattan, the reader observes two worlds at the same time. I also explored questions of restricted access, involving sequences in which the relationship between the APW and one or more TAPWs is more or less oblique—or difficult to reconstruct. In one of the TAPWs, Long, in his journal, recounted a therapy session with Rorschach. Even though the reader is given access to Rorschach's TAPW, she cannot determine how much of this memory was made accessible to Long himself. In raising questions about the relationships among worlds in comics storytelling, I outlined directions for further study of speech and thought representation in graphic narratives.

In my discussion of the PMD vis-à-vis *Watchmen*, I noted that in articulating the principle, Ryan states that the reader will consider her options in regards to a particular aspect of the textual universe and will assume that this aspect of the text is analogous to or continuous

with the AW, unless the text specifically cues her to do otherwise. I then turned to genre-related issues that may present difficulties to Ryan's model, focusing on *Watchmen's* hybrid generic profile. While *Watchmen* does fit partially into the superhero genre, it is more accurately described as a postmodern rewrite of the tradition of superhero comics. For this reason, some of the characters in the narrative have superhero qualities, while others do not—in a way that calls into question the very concept of the superhero. Because there are some elements of the superhero genre present in the narrative, it's difficult for the reader to bring the PMD to bear on the text in a consistent way.

Continuing my focus on the relevance of PWT in general and the PMD in particular for the study of *Watchmen*, my final section explores how the text's participation in the genre of alternate history poses challenges to narrative theory—challenges based more on genre than on medium. The incorporation of superheroes into a textual universe that contains so many elements similar to those in the real world hampers the reader's ability to make decisions about that world—that is, decisions about how and when to wield the PMD when it comes to interpreting the text. Characters and events in the narrative blend aspects and components of the APW with the AW, making it even more difficult for the reader to assess, in a given instance, how far the storyworld deviates from the world of attested historical realities. On this basis, I concluded that it will require a separate study to gauge the relevance of the PMD for the comics medium more generally—as opposed to the subset of comics that sketch out counterfactual histories.

Coda

In this project, I've put comics studies into dialogue with narrative theory in order to examine how each might be brought to bear on the other and how, even as contemporary models of storytelling might illuminate complex multimodal narratives like *Watchmen*, comics storytelling might in turn pose challenges to theories of narrative based on corpora consisting of print texts. In discussing how existing theories of narrative might need to be recalibrated for the purpose of analyzing the multichannel medium of graphic novels, I identify ways that the constraints and affordances of the comics medium challenge existing, verbally-biased theories of storytelling.

Let me underscore here that Emmott's contextual frame theory and Ryan's possible worlds theory provide important insights into *Watchmen*'s complex modes of storytelling practices. Emmott's concepts of enactors and frame repairs, like Ryan's idea of fictional recentering, shed light on important aspects of *Watchmen*. Yet the medium of graphic narratives in turn suggests ways in which Emmott's and Ryan's models might need to be adjusted to handle the full range of storytelling practices available today. Emmott discusses frame recalls, repairs, and switches, but her account of such frame mechanisms does not capture the medium-specific modes of blending that are possible in comics. Likewise, while readers navigate the fictional universe of *Watchmen* in ways that parallels their navigation of print texts such as *Atonement* or *The Bell Jar*, the multichannel medium of comics affords new rules for travel within the universe of *Watchmen*. By virtue of what I have termed the simultaneity effect, comics can simultaneously present multiple worlds, a technique made possible by graphic narratives' use of both verbal and visual tracks. Hence whereas ideas from narrative theory do illuminate features

of *Watchmen*, the text itself suggests how more needs to be done to articulate a graphic narrative theory with requisite nuance and delicacy.

My discussion of the affordances and constraints of the comics medium—and the bearing of those constraints and affordances on narrative theory—isn't exhaustive by any means. Thus, in each of my chapters I pointed to several areas that are worthy of future analysis. In my second chapter, I briefly alluded to the need for more research on speech and thought representation in comics. A key question is how representations of speech and thought, which partially constitute the verbal track, are augmented or complicated by the visual track. Does the absence of the verbal track in a particular panel or across panels imply silence on a character's part, or, as I suggested in my discussion of Long's therapy session with Rorschach in figure 4, can a panel with only a visual track also imply that speech or dialogue is taking place in the storyworld?

In my second chapter, I intended to address the ways that the comics medium might challenge Ryan's principle of minimal departure. However, because of the text's hybrid generic profile, I was hindered in exploring this issue and suggested that future research on a broader range of case studies would be a worthwhile project. Another direction for future research would be to cross-compare storytelling in comics and film media—and here the recent film adaptation of *Watchmen* would provide an interesting test-case. What strategies do filmmakers use when translating into the multimodal medium of cinema a story originally presented in a different multimodal medium? How do their strategies for remediation differ when they are working with a graphic novel as opposed to a print text? For that matter, what is the relation between graphic sequences in comics and the storyboards sometimes used to mock up cinematic sequences?

Overall, the goal of this project was not only to demonstrate the power and productiveness of existing models of narrative, but also to identify limitations of those models

when it comes to the study of narrative across media. By exploring medium-specific features of comics, it is possible to enrich current understandings of narrative itself. Hence graphic narrative theory can be viewed as a key component of the larger enterprise of transmedial narratology.

Endnotes

Introduction

¹ The cover of *Contract* features the label of “graphic novel.” For this reason, many consider Eisner’s text to be the first graphic novel, although the concept had been brought up among comix fans during the 1960s (Arnold).

² In 1983, DC Comics bought Charlton’s superhero characters and Moore intended to use them as his protagonists in *Watchmen*. However, DC executives realized that in doing so, Moore would make them unusable in the future. Thus Moore instead created original characters that were based (sometimes loosely) on the Charlton Comics superheroes.

³ The title of *Watchmen* is derived from the phrase “quis custodiet ipsos custodes” from Juvenal’s *Satire VI*; it’s commonly translated as “who watches the watchmen?” (this information is presented on the final page of the narrative). This phrase is seen throughout the text, scrawled on walls, fences, and alleyways. While the question reflects public unrest over the activities of the costumed superheroes prior to the Keene Act in 1977, it also indicates the authors aim to present a grittier side to the idea of the superhero. The graphic novel examines the notion of the costumed adventurer by examining the human flaws of *Watchmen*’s “hero” characters. It also raises the question of how those who are in a position of authority can themselves be monitored, such that their power doesn’t go unchecked.

⁴ As a result of his disintegration in an *intrinsic field subtractor*, Dr. Manhattan atomically restructured himself as a blue-skinned, god-like being. As such, he’s the only character in the text that has actual superpowers, which include his abilities to teleport, to disintegrate other people, and to change his physical size at will.

Chapter 1

¹ A panel in a comic is sometimes also referred to as a *frame*. Because Emmott uses the term *frame* to refer to a mental construct, to avoid confusion I use *panel* to refer to the unit within the comic, and *frame* to refer to Emmott’s model.

² In my next chapter, I propose the term *simultaneity effect* to describe panels that present different frames at the same time or, to use Emmott’s terminology, panels that prime two or more frames at once.

³ In one sense, *Watchmen* is a superhero comic, and can be classified as such. However, it is also a meta-superhero narrative, reflexively exploring the conventions of that genre.

⁴ A *postmodern rewrite* is defined by Christian Moraru as a type of intertextuality that is used to help one “understand what is unique about postmodernism...[it] is ‘generally’ deconstructive”

rather than constructive, which is to say, it critiques the ‘pretext’ and its ideology instead of ‘imitating’ them” (Moraru 260-61).

⁵In *Watchmen* in particular, Dr. Manhattan’s ability to transcend the normal limits of space add a further twist to the challenge of identifying which of his enactors is most pertinent in a given sequence.

⁶In the comics medium, panel borders may be used to denote different narrative levels. For instance, the main diegetic level may be indicated through the use of bold lines, while the subworlds of a character’s dreams and flashbacks may contain a border that is thicker, or such subworlds may not be enclosed by borders at all.

⁷The term *frame mechanism* also includes Emmott’s concept of a *frame modification*, which is the alteration of a frame by adding or removing a character or other component. I do not discuss this concept in my project.

⁸A *montage* sequence occurs when panels constituting at least two different diegetic levels (or at least different scenarios on the same level) are alternated with one another and the verbal track initially associated with one of those levels cuts across both of them.

⁹Moore said that he and Dave Gibbons decided to incorporate the pirate comic because they reasoned that the characters of the narrative experience superheroes in their real lives and “they probably wouldn’t be at all interested in superhero comics” (Gibbons, Kidd, and Essl 70).

¹⁰The “entwining” that I mention here is related to the idea of *braiding*, or *tressage*, developed by Thierry Groensteen. I discuss this idea in more detail in my next chapter.

Chapter 2

¹On pages 19-20 in *Possible Worlds*, Ryan identifies seven major types of possible worlds: reports of dream, hypotheticals (also known as counterfactuals), projections, fantasy, wishes, intents, and beliefs/knowledge.

²While I only discuss three accessibility relations, Ryan details nine different kinds of accessibility that translate into distinct narrative genres (see pages 32-33 in *Possible Worlds*).

³For Groensteen, a *multiframe* structure may be a strip, the page, the double page, and/or the book. A multiframe is any “system of panel proliferation that [is] increasingly inclusive” (Groensteen 22, 30-31). The notion of the *hyperframe* “applies itself to a single unit, which is that of the page” (Groensteen 30).

⁴For those unfamiliar with the series, *apparition* is a magical form of teleportation, through which a witch or wizard can disappear (disapparate) from one location and reappear (apparate) in another.

⁵These memories are taken from the perspectives of other characters; they are depicted throughout the text and are a pastiche of crimes Blake committed throughout his life.

⁶Note that I have shifted the focus of my discussion from issues of medium to questions of genre. I will return to this shift of focus, and its larger implications for my project, below.

⁷Veidt is a strange blend of superhero and super-villain; in murdering millions of people, he behaves more like a villain than a hero, but other aspects of his characterization align him with superheroes.

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